HE MOST THRILLING

SCIENCE FICTION

EVER TOLD

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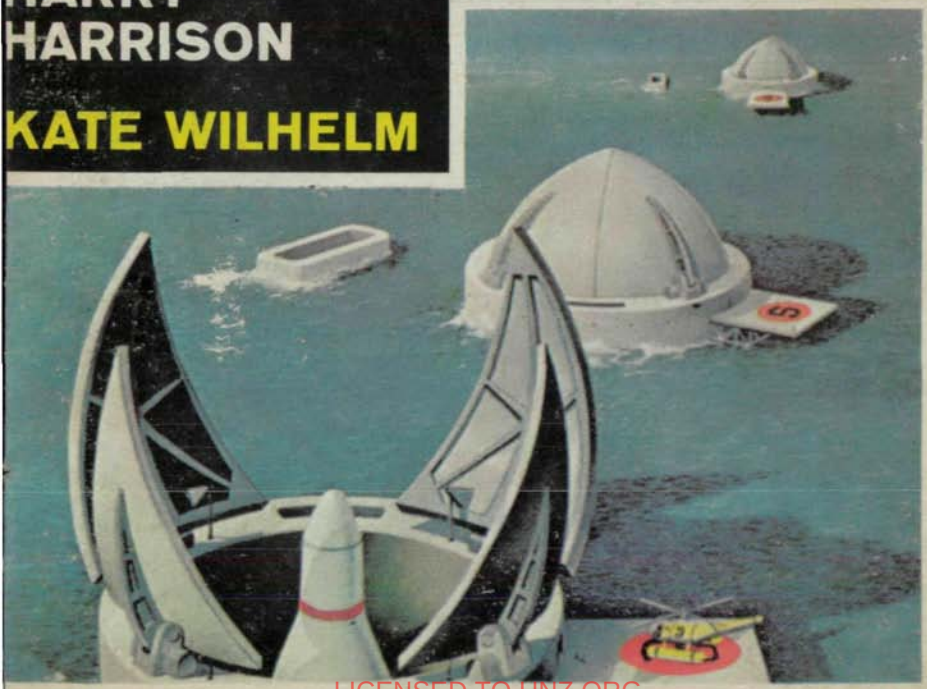

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From DAYS OF PERKY PAT
by Philip K. Dick

"Shortly, they had ascended the ramp, popped open the lid, and were crouching amidst the dust and rocks, searching the horizon. Timothy's heart pounded; this moment always overwhelmed him the first instant of reaching the upstairs."

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Perky Pat had everything: a sports car, a boy friend, even an automatic garbage disposal. Then the flukers learned about Connie Companion—who had even more. Here, in a strange guise, is a morality tale of the possible future.

THE DAYS OF PERKY PAT

By PHILIP K. DICK

Illustrated by ADKINS

AT ten in the morning a terrific horn, familiar to him, hooted Sam Regan out of his sleep, and he cursed the careboy upstairs; he knew the racket was deliberate. The careboy, circling, wanted to be certain that flukers —and not merely wild animals— got the care parcels that were to be dropped.

We'll get them, we'll get them, Sam Regan said to himself as he zipped his dust-proof overalls, put his feet into boots and then grumpily sauntered as slowly as possible toward the ramp. Several other flukers joined him, all showing similar irritation.

"He's early today," Tod Morrison complained. "And I'll bet it's all staples, sugar and flour and lard—nothing interesting like say candy."

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"We ought to be grateful" Norman Schein said.

"Grateful!" Tod halted to stare at him. "GRATEFUL?"

"Yes," Schein said. "What do you think we'd be eating without them? If they hadn't seen the clouds ten years ago."

"Well," Tod said sullenly, "I just don't like them to come *early;* I actually don't exactly mind their coming, as such."

As he put his shoulders against the lid at the top of the ramp, Schein said genially, "That's mighty tolerant of you, Tod boy. I'm sure the careboys would be pleased to hear your sentiments."

Of the three of them, Sam Regan was the last to reach the surface; he did not like the upstairs at all, and he did not care who knew it. And anyhow, no one could compel him to leave the safety of the Pinole Fluke-pit; it was entirely his business, and he noted now that a number of his fellow flukers had elected to remain below in their quarters, confident that those who did answer the horn would bring them back something.

"It's bright," Tod murmured, blinking in the sun.

The care ship sparkled close overhead, set against the gray sky as if hanging from an uneasy thread. Good pilot, this drop, Tod decided. He, or rather *it,* just lazily handles it, in no hurry. Tod waved at the care ship, and once more the huge horn burst out its din, making him clap his hands to his ears. Hey, a joke's a joke, he said to himself. And then the horn ceased; the careboy had relented.

"Wave to him to drop," Norm Schein said to Tod. "You've got the wigwag."

"Sure," Tod said, and began laboriously flapping the red flag, which the Martian creatures had long ago provided, back and forth, back and forth.

A projectile slid from the underpart of the ship, tossed out stabilizers, spiraled toward the ground.

"Sheoot," Sam Regan said with disgust. "It is staples; they don't have the parachute." He turned away, not interested.

HOW miserable the upstairs looked today, he thought as he surveyed the scene surrounding him. There, to the right, the uncompleted house which someone—not far from their pit—had begun to build out of lumber salvaged from Vallejo, ten miles to the north. Animals or radiation dust had gotten the builder, and so his work remained where it was; it would never be put to use. And, Sam Regan saw, an unusually heavy precipitate had formed since last he had been up here, Thursday morning or perhaps Friday; he had lost exact

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track. The darn dust, he thought. Just rocks, pieces of rubble, and the dust. World's becoming a dusty object with no one to whisk it off regularly. How about you? he asked silently of the Martian careboy flying in slow circles overhead. Isn't your technology limitless? Can't you appear some morning with a dust rag a million miles in surface area and restore our planet to pristine newness?

Or rather, he thought, to pristine *oldness*, the way it was in the "ol-days," as the children call it. We'd like that. While you're looking for something to give to us in the way of further aid, try that.

The careboy circled once more, searching for sign of writing in the dust: a message from the flukers below. I'll write that, Sam thought. BRING DUST RAG, RESTORE OUR CIVILIZATION. Okay, careboy?

All at once the care ship shot off, no doubt on its way back home to its base on Luna or perhaps all the way to Mars.

From the open fluke-pit hole, up which the three of them had come, a further head poked, a woman. Jean Regan, Sam's wife, appeared, shielded by a bonnet against the gray, blinding sun, frowning and saying, "Anything important? Anything *new?*"

"Fraid not," Sam said. The care parcel projectile had landed and he walked toward it, scuffing his boots in the dust. The hull of the projectile had cracked open from the impact and he could see the cannisters already. It looked to be five thousand pounds of salt . . . might as well leave it up here so the animals won't starve, he decided. He felt despondent.

HOW peculiarly anxious the careboys were. Concerned all the time that the mainstays of existence be ferried from their own planet to Earth. They must think we eat all day long, Sam thought. My god . . . the pit was filled to capacity with stored foods. But of course it had been one of the smallest public shelters in Northern California.

"Hey," Schein said, stooping down by the projectile and peering into the crack opened along its side. "I believe I see something we can use." He found a rusted metal pole—once it had helped reinforce the concrete side of an ol-days public building—and poked at the projectile, stirring its release mechanism into action. The mechanism, triggered off, popped the rear half of the projectile open . . . and there lay the contents.

"Looks like radios in that box," Tod said. "Transistor radios." Thoughtfully stroking his short black beard he said, "Maybe we can use them for something new in our layouts."

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"Mine's already got a radio," Schein pointed out.

"Well, build an electronic self-directing lawn mower with the parts," Tod said. "You don't have that, do you?" He knew the Scheins' Perky Pat layout fairly well; the two couples, he and his wife with Schein and his, had played together a good deal, being almost evenly matched.

Sam Regan said, "Dibs on the radios, because I can use them." His layout lacked the automatic garage-door opener that both Schein and Tod had; he was considerably behind them.

"Let's get to work," Schein agreed. "We'll leave the staples here and just cart back the radios. If anybody wants the staples, let them come here and get them. Before the do-cats do."

Nodding, the other two men fell to the job of carting the useful contents of the projectile to the entrance of their fluke-pit ramp. For use in their precious, elaborate Perky Pat layouts.

SEATED cross-legged with his whetstone, Timothy Schein, ten years old and aware of his many responsibilities, sharpened his knife, slowly and expertly. Meanwhile, disturbing him, his mother and father noisily quarreled with Mr. and Mrs. Morrison, on the far side of the partition. They were playing Perky Pat again. As usual.

How many times today they have to play that dumb game? Timothy asked himself. Forever, I guess. He could see nothing in it, but his parents played on anyhow. And they weren't the only ones; he knew from what other kids said, even from other fluke-pits, that their parents, too, played Perky Pat most of the day, and sometimes even on into the night.

His mother said loudly, "Perky Pat's going to the grocery store and it's got one of those electric eyes that opens the door. Look." A pause. "See, it opened for her, and now she's inside."

"She pushes a cart," Timothy's dad added, in support.

"No, she doesn't," Mrs. Morrison contradicted. "That's wrong. She gives her list to the grocer and he fills it."

"That's only in little neighborhood stores," his mother explained. "And this is a supermarket, you can tell because of the electric eye door."

"I'm sure all grocery stores had electric eye doors," Mrs. Morrison said stubbornly, and her husband chimed in with his agreement. Now the voices rose in anger; another squabble had broken out. As usual.

Aw, cung to them, Timothy said to himself, using the strongest word which he and his friends knew. What's a supermarket anyhow? He tested the blade of

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his knife—he had made it himself, originally, out of a heavy metal pan—and then hopped to his feet. A moment later he had sprinted silently down the hall and was rapping his special rap on the door of the Chamberlains' quarters.

Fred, also ten years old, answered. "Hi. Ready to go? I see you got that ol' knife of yours all sharpened; what do you think we'll catch?"

"Not a do-cat," Timothy said. "A lot better than that; I'm tired of eating do-cat. Too peppery."

"Your parents playing Perky Pat?"

"Yeah."

Fred said, "My mom and dad have been gone for a long time, off playing with the Benteleys." He glanced sideways at Timothy, and in an instant they had shared their mute disappointment regarding their parents. Gosh, and maybe the darn game was all over the world, by now; that would not have surprised either of them.

"How come your parents play it?" Timothy asked.

"Same reason yours do," Fred said.

Hesitating, Timothy said, "Well, why? I don't know why they do; I'm asking you, can't you say?"

"It's because—" Fred broke off. "Ask them. Come on; let's get upstairs and start hunting." His eyes shone. "Let's see what we can catch and kill today."

SHORTLY, they had ascended the ramp, popped open the lid, and were crouching amidst the dust and rocks, searching the horizon. Timothy's heart pounded; this moment always overwhelmed him, the first instant of reaching the upstairs. The thrilling initial sight of the expanse. Because it was never the same. The dust, heavier today, had a darker gray color to it than before; it seemed denser, more mysterious.

Here and there, covered by many layers of dust, lay parcels dropped from past relief ships—dropped and left to deteriorate. Never to be claimed. And, Timothy saw, an additional new projectile which had arrived that morning. Most of its cargo could be seen within; the grownups had not had any use for the majority of the contents, today.

"Look," Fred said softly.

Two do-cats—mutant dogs or cats; no one knew for sure—could be seen, lightly sniffing at the projectile. Attracted by the unclaimed contents.

"We don't want them," Timothy said.

"That one's sure nice and fat," Fred said longingly. But it was Timothy that had the knife; all he himself had was a string with

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a metal bolt on the end, a bull-roarer that could kill a bird or a small animal at a distance—but useless against a do-cat, which generally weighed fifteen to twenty pounds and sometimes even more.

High up in the sky a dot moved at immense speed, and Timothy knew that it was a care ship heading for another fluke-pit, bringing supplies to it. Sure are busy, he thought to himself. Those careboys always coming and going; they never stop, because if they did, the grownups would die. Wouldn't that be too bad? he thought ironically. Sure be sad.

Fred said, "Wave to it and maybe it'll drop something." He grinned at Timothy, and then they both broke out laughing.

"Sure," Timothy said. "Let's see; what do I want?" Again the two of them laughed at the idea of them wanting something. The two boys had the entire upstairs, as far as the eye could see . . . they had even more than the careboys had, and that was plenty, more than plenty.

"Do you think they know?" Fred said, "that our parents play Perky Pat with furniture made out of what they drop? I bet they don't know about Perky Pat; they never have seen a Perky Pat doll, and if they did they'd be really mad."

"You're right," Timothy said. "They'd be so sore they'd probably stop dropping stuff." He glanced at Fred, catching his eye.

"Aw no," Fred said. "We shouldn't tell them; your dad would beat you again if you did that, and probably me, too."

Even so, it was an interesting idea. He could imagine first the surprise and then the anger of the careboys; it would be fun to see that, see the reaction of the eight-legged Martian creatures who had so much charity inside their warty bodies, the cephalopodic univalve mollusk-like organisms who had voluntarily taken it upon themselves to supply succor to the waning remnants of the human race . . . this was how they got paid back for their charity, this utterly wasteful, stupid purpose to which their goods were being put. This stupid Perky Pat game that all the adults played.

And anyhow it would be very hard to tell them; there was almost no communication between humans and careboys. They were too different. Acts, deeds, could be done, conveying something . . . but not mere words, not mere *signs*. And anyhow—

A great brown rabbit bounded by to the right, past the half-completed house. Timothy whipped out his knife. "Oh boy!" he said aloud in excitement. "Let's go!" He set off across the

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rubbly ground, Fred a little behind him. Gradually they gained on the rabbit; swift running came easy to the two boys: they had done much practicing.

"Throw the knife!" Fred panted, and Timothy, skidding to a halt, raised his right arm, paused to take aim, and then hurled the sharpened, weighted knife. His most valuable, self-made possession.

It cleaved the rabbit straight through its vitals. The rabbit tumbled, slid, raising a cloud of dust.

"I bet we can get a dollar for that!" Fred exclaimed, leaping up and down. "The hide alone—I bet we can get fifty cents just for the darn hide!"

Together, they hurried toward the dead rabbit, wanting to get there before a red-tailed hawk or a day-owl swooped on it from the gray sky above.

BENDING, Norman Schein picked up his Perky Pat doll and said sullenly, "I'm quitting; I don't want to play any more."

Distressed, his wife protested, "But we've got Perky Pat all the way downtown in her new Ford hardtop convertible and parked and a dime in the meter and she's shopped and now she's in the analyst's office reading *Fortune*—we're way ahead of the Morrisons! Why do you want to quit, Norm?"

"We just don't agree," Norman grumbled. "You say analysts charged twenty dollars an hour and I distinctly remember them charging only ten; nobody could charge twenty. So you're penalizing our side, and for what? The Morrisons agree it was only ten. Don't you?" he said to Mr. and Mrs. Morrison, who squatted on the far side of the layout which combined both couples' Perky Pat sets.

Helen Morrison said to her husband, "You went to the analyst more than I did; are you sure he charged only ten?"

"Well, I went mostly to group therapy," Tod said. "At the Berkeley State Mental Hygiene Clinic, and they charged according to your ability to pay. And Perky Pat is at a *private* psychoanalyst."

"We'll have to ask someone else," Helen said to Norman Schein. "I guess all we can do now this minute is suspend the game." He found himself being glared at by her, too, now, because by his insistence on that one point he had put an end to their game for the whole afternoon.

"Shall we leave it all set up?" Fran Schein asked. "We might as well; maybe we can finish tonight after dinner."

Norman Schein gazed down at their combined layout, the swanky shops, the well-lit streets

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with the parked new-model cars, all of them shiny, the split-level house itself, where Perky Pat lived and where she entertained Leonard, her boy friend. It was the *house* that he perpetually yearned for; the house was the real focus of the layout—of all the Perky Pat layouts, however much they might otherwise differ.

Perky Pat's wardrobe, for instance, there in the closet of the house, the big bedroom closet. Her capri pants, her white cotton short-shorts, her two-piece polka dot swimsuit, her fuzzy sweaters . . . and there, in her bedroom, her hi-fi set, her collection of long playing records . . .

It had been this way, once, really been like this in the old-days. Norm Schein could remember his own l-p record collection, and he had once had clothes almost as swanky as Perky Pat's boy friend Leonard, cashmere jackets and tweed suits and Italian sportshirts and shoes made in England. He hadn't owned a Jaguar XKE sports car, like Leonard did, but he had owned a fine-looking old 1963 Mercedes-Benz, which he had used to drive to work.

We lived then, Norm Schein said to himself, *like Perky Pat and Leonard do now.* This is how it actually was.

To his wife he said, pointing to the clock radio which Perky Pat kept beside her bed, "Remember our G.E. clock radio? How it used to wake us up in the morning with classical music from that FM station, KSFR? The 'Wolfgangers,' the program was called. From six a.m. to nine every morning."

"Yes," Fran said, nodding soberly. "And you used to get up before me; I knew I should have gotten up and fixed bacon and hot coffee for you, but it was so much fun just indulging myself, not stirring for half an hour longer, until the kids woke up."

"Woke up, hell; they were awake before we were," Norm said. "Don't you remember? They were in the back watching 'The Three Stooges' on TV until eight. Then I got up and fixed hot cereal for them, and then I went on to my job at Ampex down at Redwood City."

"Oh yes," Fran said. "The TV." Their Perky Pat did not have a TV set; they had lost it to the Regans in a game a week ago, and Norm had not yet been able to fashion another one realistic-looking enough to substitute. So, in a game, they pretended now that "the TV repairman had come for it." That was how they explained their Perky Pat not having something she really would have had.

NORM thought, Playing this game . . . it's like being back

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there, back in the world before the war. That's why we play it, I suppose. He felt shame, but only fleetingly; the shame, almost at once, was replaced by the desire to play a little longer.

"Let's not quit," he said suddenly. "I'll agree the psychoanalyst would have charged Perky Pat twenty dollars. Okay?"

"Okay," both the Morrisons said together, and they settled back down once more to resume the game.

Tod Morrison had picked up their Perky Pat; he held it, stroking its blonde hair—theirs was blonde, whereas the Scheins' was a brunette—and fiddling with the snaps of its skirt.

"Whatever are you doing?" his wife inquired.

"Nice skirt she has," Tod said. "You did a good job sewing it."

Norm said, "Ever know a girl, back in the ol-days, that looked like Perky Pat?"

"No," Tod Morrison said somberly. "Wish I had, though. I *saw* girls like Perky Pat, especially when I was living in Los Angeles during the Korean War. But I just could never manage to know them personally. And of course there were really terrific girl singers, like Peggy Lee and Julie London . . . they looked a lot like Perky Pat."

"Play," Fran said vigorously. And Norm, whose turn it was, picked up the spinner and spun.

"Eleven," he said. "That gets my Leonard out of the sports car repair garage and on his way to the race track." He moved the Leonard doll ahead.

Thoughtfully, Tod Morrison said, "You know, I was out the other day hauling in perishables which the careboys had dropped . . . Bill Ferner was there, and he told me something interesting. He met a fluker from a fluke-pit down where Oakland used to be. And at that fluke-pit you know what they play? Not Perky Pat. They never have heard of Perky Pat."

"Well, what *do* they play, then?" Helen asked.

"They have another doll entirely." Frowning, Tod continued, "Bill says the Oakland fluker called it a Connie Companion doll. Ever hear of that?"

"A 'Connie Companion' doll," Fran said thoughtfully. "How strange. I wonder what she's like. Does she have a boy friend?"

"Oh sure," Tod said. "His name is Paul. Connie and Paul. You know, we ought to hike down there to that Oakland Fluke-pit one of these days and see what Connie and Paul look like and how they live. Maybe we could learn a few things to add to our own layouts."

Norm said, "Maybe we could play them."

Puzzled, Fran said, "Could a

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Perky Pat play a Connie Companion? Is that possible? I wonder what would happen."

There was no answer from any of the others. Because none of them knew.

AS they skinned the rabbit, Fred said to Timothy, "Where did the name 'fluker' come from? It's sure an ugly word; why do they use it?"

"A fluker is a person who lived through the hydrogen war," Timothy explained. "You know, by a fluke. A fluke of fate. See? Because almost everyone was killed; there used to be thousands of people."

"But what's a 'fluke,' then? When you say a 'fluke of fate—' "

"A fluke is when fate has decided to spare you," Timothy said, and that was all he had to say on the subject. That was all he knew.

Fred said thoughtfully, "But you and I, we're not flukers because we weren't alive when the war broke out. We were born after."

"Right," Timothy said.

"So anybody who calls me a fluker," Fred said, "is going to get hit in the eye with my bull-roarer."

"And 'careboy,' " Timothy said, "that's a made-up word, too. It's from when stuff was dumped from jet planes and ships to people in a disaster area. They were called 'care parcels' because they came from people who cared."

"I know that," Fred said. "I didn't ask that."

"Well, I told you anyhow," Timothy said.

The two boys continued skinning the rabbit.

JEAN REGAN said to her husband, "Have you heard about the Connie Companion doll?" She glanced down the long rough-board table to make sure none of the other families was listening. "Sam," she said, "I heard it from Helen Morrison; she heard it from Tod and he heard it from Bill Ferner, I think. So it's probably true."

"What's true?" Sam said.

"That in the Oakland Flukepit they don't have Perky Pat; they have Connie Companion . . . and it occurred to me that maybe some of this—you know, this sort of emptiness, this boredom we feel now and then—maybe if we saw the Connie Companion doll and how she lives, maybe we could add enough to our own layout to—" She paused, reflecting. "To make it more complete."

"I don't care for the name," Sam Regan said. "Connie Companion; it sounds cheap." He spooned up some of the plain, utilitarian grain-mash which the careboys had been dropping, of late. And, as he ate a mouthful,

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he thought, I'll bet Connie Companion doesn't eat slop like this; I'll bet she eats cheeseburgers with all the trimmings, at a high-type drive-in.

"Could we make a trek down there?" Jean asked.

"To Oakland Fluke-pit?" Sam stared at her. "It's *fifteen miles*, all the way on the other side of the Berkeley Fluke-pit!"

"But this is important," Jean said stubbornly. "And Bill says that a fluker from Oakland came all the way up here, in search of electronic parts or something . . . so if he can do it, we can. We've got the dust suits they dropped us. I know we could do it."

Little Timothy Schein, sitting with his family, had overheard her; now he spoke up. "Mrs. Regan, Fred Chamberlain and I, we could trek down that far, if you pay us. What do you say?" He nudged Fred, who sat beside him. "Couldn't we? For maybe five dollars."

Fred, his face serious, turned to Mrs. Regan and said, "We could get you a Connie Companion doll. For five dollars for *each* of us."

"Good grief," Jean Regan said, outraged. And dropped the subject.

But later, after dinner, she brought it up again when she and Sam were alone in their quarters.

"Sam, I've got to see it," she burst out. Sam, in a galvanized tub, was taking his weekly bath, so he had to listen to her. "Now that we know it exists we have to play against someone at the Oakland Fluke-pit; at least we can do that. Can't we? Please." She paced back and forth in the small room, her hands clasped tensely. "Connie Companion may have a Standard Station and an airport terminal with jet landing strip and color TV and a French restaurant where they serve escargot, like the one you and I went to when we were first married . . . I just have to see her layout."

"I don't know," Sam said hesitantly. "There's something about Connie Companion doll that—makes me uneasy."

"What could it possibly be?"

"I don't know."

Jean said bitterly, "It's because you know her layout is so much better than ours and she's so much more than Perky Pat."

"Maybe that's it," Sam murmured.

"If you don't go, if you don't try to make contact with them down at the Oakland Fluke-pit, someone else will—someone with more ambition will get ahead of you. Like Norman Schein. He's not afraid the way you are."

Sam said nothing; he continued with his bath. But his hands shook.

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A CAREBOY had recently dropped complicated pieces of machinery which were, evidently, a form of mechanical computer. For several weeks the computers—if that was what they were—had sat about the pit in their cartons, unused, but now Norman Schein was finding something to do with one. At the moment he was busy adapting some of its gears, the smallest ones, to form a garbage disposal unit for his Perky Pat's kitchen.

Using the tiny special tools—designed and built by inhabitants of the fluke-pit—which were necessary in fashioning environmental items for Perky Pat, he was busy at his hobby bench. Thoroughly engrossed in what he was doing, he all at once realized that Fran was standing directly behind him, watching.

"I get nervous when I'm watched," Norm said, holding a tiny gear with a pair of tweezers.

"Listen," Fran said, "I've thought of something. Does this suggest anything to you?" She placed before him one of the transistor radios which had been dropped the day before.

"It suggests that garage-door opener already thought of," Norm said irritably. He continued with his work, expertly fitting the miniature pieces together in the sink drain of Pat's kitchen; such delicate work demanded maximum concentration.

Fran said, "It suggests that there must be radio *transmitters* on Earth somewhere, or the careboys wouldn't have dropped these."

"So?" Norm said, uninterested.

"Maybe our Mayor has one," Fran said. "Maybe there's one right here in our own pit, and we could use it to call the Oakland Fluke-pit. Representatives from there could meet us half way . . . say at the Berkeley Fluke-pit. And we could play there. So we wouldn't have that long fifteen mile trip."

Norman hesitated in his work; he set the tweezers down and said slowly, "I think possibly you're right." But if their Mayor Hooker Glebe had a radio transmitter, would he let them use it? And if he did—

"We can try," Fran urged. "It wouldn't hurt to try."

"Okay," Norm said, rising from his hobby bench.

THE short, sly-faced man in Army uniform, the Mayor of the Pinole Fluke-pit, listened in silence as Norm Schein spoke. Then he smiled a wise, cunning smile. "Sure, I have a radio transmitter. Had it all the time. Fifty watt output. But why would you want to get in touch with the Oakland Fluke-pit?"

Guardedly, Norm said, "That's my business."

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looker Glebe said thoughtfully. "I'll let you use it for fifteen dollars."

It was a nasty shock, and Norm recoiled. Good lord; all the money he and his wife had—they needed every bill of it for use in playing Perky Pat. Money was the tender in the game; there was no other criterion by which one could tell if he had won or lost. "That's too much," he said aloud.

"Well, say ten," the Mayor said, shrugging.

In the end they settled for six dollars and a fifty cent piece.

"I'll make the radio contact for you," Hooker Glebe said. "Because you don't know how. It will take time." He began turning a crank at the side of the generator of the transmitter. "I'll notify you when I've made contact with them. But give me the money now." He held out his hand for it, and, with great reluctance, Norm paid him.

It was not until late that evening that Hooker managed to establish contact with Oakland. Pleased with himself, beaming in self-satisfaction, he appeared at the Scheins' quarters, during their dinner hour. "All set," he announced. "Say, you know there are actually *nine* fluke-pits in Oakland? I didn't know that. Which you want? I've got one with the radio code of Red Vanilla." He chuckled. "They're tough and suspicious down there; it was hard to get any of them to answer."

Leaving his evening meal, Norman hurried to the Mayor's quarters, Hooker puffing along after him.

The transmitter, sure enough, was on, and static wheezed from the speaker of its monitoring unit. Awkwardly, Norm seated himself at the microphone. "Do I just talk?" he asked Hooker Glebe.

"Just say, This is Pinole Fluke-pit calling. Repeat that a couple of times and then when they acknowledge, you say what you want to say." The Mayor fiddled with controls of the transmitter, fussing in an important fashion.

"This is Pinole Fluke-pit," Norm said loudly into the microphone.

Almost at once a clear voice from the monitor said, "This is Red Vanilla Three answering." The voice was cold and harsh; it struck him forcefully as distinctly alien. Hooker was right. "Do you have Connie Companion down there where you are?"

"Yes we do," the Oakland fluker answered.

"Well, I challenge you," Norman said, feeling the veins in his throat pulse with the tension of what he was saying. "We're Perky Pat in this area; we'll play Perky Pat against your Connie

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Companion. Where can we meet?"

"Perky Pat," the Oakland fluker echoed. "Yeah, I know about her. What would the stakes be, in your mind?"

"Up here we play for paper money mostly," Norman said, feeling that his response was somehow lame.

"We've got lots of paper money," the Oakland fluker said cuttingly. "That wouldn't interest any of us. What else?"

"I don't know." He felt hampered, talking to someone he could not see; he was not used to that. People should, he thought, be face to face, then you can see the other person's expression. This was not natural. "Let's meet half way," he said, "and discuss it. Maybe we could meet at the Berkeley Fluke-pit; how about that?"

The Oakland fluker said, "That's too far. You mean lug our Connie Companion layout all that way? It's too heavy and something might happen to it."

"No, just to discuss rules and stakes," Norman said.

Dubiously, the Oakland fluker said, "Well, I guess we could do that. But you better understand —we take Connie Companion doll pretty damn seriously; you better be prepared to talk terms."

"We will," Norm assured him.

All this time Mayor Hooker Glebe had been cranking the handle of the generator; perspiring, his face bloated with exertion, he motioned angrily for Norm to conclude his palaver.

"At the Berkeley Fluke-pit," Norm finished. "In three days. And send your best player, the one who has the biggest and most authentic layout. Our Perky Pat layouts are works of art, you understand."

The Oakland fluker said, "We'll believe that when we see them. After all, we've got carpenters and electricians and plasterers here, building our layouts; I'll bet you're all unskilled."

"Not as much as you think," Norm said hotly, and laid down the microphone. To Hooker Glebe —who had immediately stopped cranking—he said, "We'll beat them. Wait'll they see the garbage disposal unit I'm making for my Perky Pat; did you know there were people back in the old-days, I mean real alive human beings, who didn't have garbage disposal units?"

"I remember," Hooker said peevishly. "Say, you got a lot of cranking for your money; I think you gypped me, talking so long." He eyed Norm with such hostility that Norm began to feel uneasy. After all, the Mayor of the pit had the authority to evict any fluker he wished; that was their law.

"I'll give you the fire alarm

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box I just finished the other day," Norm said. "In my layout it goes at the corner of the block where Perky Pat's boy friend Leonard lives."

"Good enough," Hooker agreed, and his hostility faded. It was replaced, at once, by desire. "Let's see it, Norm. I bet it'll go good in my layout; a fire alarm box is just what I need to complete my first block where I have the mailbox. Thank you."

"You're welcome," Norm sighed, philosophically.

WHEN he returned from the two-day trek to the Berkeley Fluke-pit his face was so grim that his wife knew at once that the parley with the Oakland people had not gone well.

That morning a careboy had dropped cartons of a synthetic tea-like drink; she fixed a cup of it for Norman, waiting to hear what had taken place eight miles to the south.

"We haggled," Norm said, seated wearily on the bed which he and his wife and child all shared. "They don't want money; they don't want goods—naturally not goods, because the darn careboys are dropping regularly down there, too."

"What will they accept, then?"

Norm said, "Perky Pat herself." He was silent, then.

"Oh good lord," she said, appalled.

"But if we win," Norm pointed out, "we win Connie Companion."

"And the layouts? What about them?"

"We keep our own. It's just Perky Pat herself, not Leonard, not anything else."

"But," she protested, "what'll we *do* if we lose Perky Pat?"

"I can make another one," Norm said. "Given time. There's still a big supply of thermoplastics and artificial hair, here in the pit. And I have plenty of different paints; it would take at least a month, but I could do it. I don't look forward to the job, I admit. But—" His eyes glinted. "Don't look on the dark side; *imagine what it would be like to win Connie Companion doll.* I think we may well win; their delegate seemed smart and, as Hooker said, tough . . . but the one I talked to didn't strike me as being very flukey. You know, on good terms with luck."

And, after all, the element of luck, of chance, entered into each stage of the game through the agency of the spinner.

"It seems wrong," Fran said, "to put up Perky Pat herself. But if you say so—" She managed to smile a little. "I'll go along with it. And if you won Connie Companion—who knows? You might be elected Mayor when Hooker dies. Imagine, to have won somebody else's *doll*—not just the

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game, the money, but the *doll itself.*"

"I can win," Norm said soberly. "Because I'm very flukey." He could feel it in him, the same flukeyness that had got him through the hydrogen war alive, that had kept him alive ever since. You either have it or you don't, he realized. And I do.

His wife said, "Shouldn't we ask Hooker to call a meeting of everyone in the pit, and send the best player out of our entire group? So as to be the surest of winning."

"Listen," Norm Schein said emphatically. "I'm the best player. I'm going. And so are you; we made a good team, and we don't want to break it up. Anyhow, we'll need at least two people to carry Perky Pat's layout." All in all, he judged, their layout weighed sixty pounds.

HIS plan seemed to him to be satisfactory. But when he mentioned it to the others living in the Pinole Fluke-pit he found himself facing sharp disagreement. The whole next day was filled with argument.

"You can't lug your layout all that way yourselves," Sam Regan said. "Either take more people with you or carry your layout in a vehicle of some kind. Such as a cart." He scowled at Norm.

"Where'd I get a cart?" Norm demanded.

"Maybe something could be adapted," Sam said. "I'll give you every bit of help I can. Personally, I'd go along but as I told my wife this whole idea worries me." He thumped Norm on the back. "I admire your courage, you and Fran, setting off this way. I wish I had what it takes." He looked unhappy.

In the end, Norm settled on a wheelbarrow. He and Fran would take turns pushing it. That way neither of them would have to carry any load above and beyond their food and water, and of course knives by which to protect them from the do-cats.

As they were carefully placing the elements of their layout in the wheelbarrow, Norm Schein's boy Timothy came sidling up to them. "Take me along, Dad," he pleaded. "For fifty cents I'll go as guide and scout, and also I'll help you catch food along the way."

"We'll manage fine," Norm said. "You stay here in the fluke-pit; you'll be safer here." It annoyed him, the idea of his son tagging along on an important venture such as this. It was almost—sacrilegious.

"Kiss us goodbye," Fran said to Timothy, smiling at him briefly; then her attention returned to the layout within the wheelbarrow. "I hope it doesn't tip over," she said fearfully to Norm.

"Not a chance," Norm said. "If

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we're careful." He felt confident.

A few moments later they began wheeling the wheelbarrow up the ramp to the lid at the top, to upstairs. Their journey to the Berkeley Fluke-pit had begun.

A MILE outside the Berkeley Fluke-pit he and Fran began to stumble over empty drop-canisters and some only partly empty: remains of past care parcels such as littered the surface near their own pit. Norm Schein breathed a sigh of relief; the journey had not been so bad after all, except that his hands had become blistered from gripping the metal handles of the wheelbarrow, and Fran had turned her ankle so that now she walked with a painful limp. But it had taken them less time than he had anticipated, and his mood was one of buoyancy.

Ahead, a figure appeared, crouching low in the ash. A boy. Norm waved at him and called, "Hey, sonny—we're from the Pinole pit; we're supposed to meet a party from Oakland here . . . do you remember me?"

The boy, without answering, turned and scampered off.

"Nothing to be afraid of," Norm said to his wife. "He's going to tell their Mayor. A nice old fellow named Ben Fennimore."

Soon several adults appeared, approaching warily.

With relief, Norm set the legs of the wheelbarrow down into the ash, letting go and wiping his face with his handkerchief. "Has the Oakland team arrived yet?" he called.

"Not yet," a tall, elderly man with a white armband and ornate cap answered. "It's you, Schein, isn't it?" he said, peering. This was Ben Fennimore. "Back already with your layout." Now the Berkeley flukers had begun crowding around the wheelbarrow, inspecting the Scheins' layout. Their faces showed admiration.

"They have Perky Pat here," Norm explained to his wife. "But —" He lowered his voice. "Their layouts are only basic. Just a house, wardrobe and car . . . they've built almost nothing. No imagination."

One Berkeley fluker, a woman, said wonderingly to Fran, "And you made each of the pieces of furniture yourselves?" Marveling, she turned to the man beside her. "See what they've accomplished, Ed?"

"Yes," the man answered, nodding. "Say," he said to Fran and Norm, "can we see it all set up? You're going to set it up in our pit, aren't you?"

"We are indeed," Norm said.

The Berkeley flukers helped push the wheelbarrow the last mile. And before long they were descending the ramp, to the pit below the surface.

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"It's a big pit," Norm said knowingly to Fran. "Must be two thousand people here. This is where the University of California was."

"I see," Fran said, a little timid at entering a strange pit; it was the first time in years—since the war, in fact—that she had seen any strangers. And so many at once. It was almost too much for her; Norm felt her shrink back, pressing against him in fright.

WHEN they had reached the first level and were starting to unload the wheelbarrow, Ben Fennimore came up to them and said softly, "I think the Oakland people have been spotted; we just got a report of activity upstairs. So be prepared." He added, "We're rooting for you, of course, because you're Perky Pat, the same as us."

"Have you ever seen Connie Companion doll?" Fran asked him.

"No ma'am," Fennimore answered courteously. "But naturally we've heard about it, being neighbors to Oakland and all. I'll tell you one thing . . . we hear that Connie Companion doll is a bit older than Perky Pat. You know—more, um, *mature*." He explained, "I just wanted to prepare you.

Norm and Fran glanced at each other. "Thanks," Norm said slowly. "Yes, we should be as much prepared as possible. How about Paul?"

"Oh, he's not much," Fennimore said. "Connie runs things; I don't even think Paul has a real apartment of his own. But you better wait until the Oakland flukers get here; I don't want to mislead you—my knowledge is all hearsay, you understand."

Another Berkeley fluker, standing nearby, spoke up, "I saw Connie once, and she's much more grown up than Perky Pat."

"How old do you figure Perky Pat is?" Norm asked him.

"Oh, I'd say seventeen or eighteen," Norm was told.

"And Connie?" He waited tensely.

"Oh, she might be twenty-five, even."

From the ramp behind them they heard noises. More Berkeley flukers appeared, and, after them, two men carrying between them a platform on which, spread out, Norm saw a great, spectacular layout.

This was the Oakland team, and they weren't a couple, a man and wife; they were both men, and they were hard-faced with stern, remote eyes. They jerked their heads briefly at him and Fran, acknowledging their presence. And then, with enormous care, they set down the platform on which their layout rested.

Behind them came a third

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Oakland fluker, carrying a metal box, much like a lunch pail. Norm, watching, knew instinctively that in the box lay Connie Companion doll. The Oakland fluker produced a key and began unlocking the box.

"We're ready to begin playing any time," the taller of the Oakland men said. "As we agreed in our discussion, we'll use a numbered spinner instead of dice. Less chance of cheating that way."

"Agreed," Norm said. Hesitantly he held out his hand. "I'm Norman Schein and this is my wife and play-partner Fran."

The Oakland man, evidently the leader, said, "I'm Walter R. Wynn. This is my partner here, Charley Dowd, and the man with the box, that's Peter Foster. He isn't going to play; he just guards our layout." Wynn glanced about, at the Berkeley flukers, as if saying, I know you're all partial to Perky Pat, in here. But we don't care; we're not scared.

Fran said, "We're ready to play, Mr. Wynn." Her voice was low but controlled.

"What about money?" Fennimore asked.

"I think both teams have plenty of money," Wynn said. He laid out several thousand dollars in greenbacks, and now Norm did the same. "The money of course is not a factor in this, except as a means of conducting the game."

Norm nodded; he understood perfectly. Only the dolls themselves mattered. And now, for the first time, he saw Connie Companion doll.

She was being placed in her bedroom by Mr. Foster who evidently was in charge of her. And the sight took his breath away. Yes, she was older. A grown woman, not a girl at all . . . the difference between her and Perky Pat was acute. And so life-like. Carved, not poured; she obviously had been whittled out of wood and then painted—she was not a thermoplastic. And her hair. It appeared to be genuine hair.

He was deeply impressed.

"What do you think of her?" Walter Wynn asked, with a faint grin.

"Very—impressive," Norm conceded.

NOW the Oaklanders were studying Perky Pat. "Poured thermoplastic," one of them said. "Artificial hair. Nice clothes, though; all stitched by hand, you can see that. Interesting; what we heard was correct. Perky Pat isn't a grownup, she's just a teen ager."

Now the male companion to Connie appeared; he was set down in the bedorom beside Connie.

"Wait a minute," Norm said.

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"You're putting Paul or whatever his name is, in her bedroom with her? Doesn't he have to start out from his own apartment?"

Wynn said, "They're married."

"Married!" Norman and Fran stared at him, dumbfounded.

"Why sure," Wynn said. "So naturally they live together. Your dolls, they're not, are they?"

"N-no," Fran said. "Leonard is Perky Pat's boy friend . . ." Her voice trailed off. "Norm," she said, clutching his arm, "I don't believe him; I think he's just saying they're married to get the advantage. Because if they both start out from the same room—"

Norm said aloud, "You fellows, look here. It's not fair, calling them married."

Wynn said, "We're not 'calling' them married; they are married. Their names are Connie and Paul Lathrope, of 24 Arden Place Piedmont. They've been married for a year, most players will tell you." He sounded calm.

Maybe, Norm thought, it's true. He was truly shaken.

"Look at them together," Fran said, kneeling down to examine the Oaklanders' layout. "In the same bedroom, in the same house. Why, Norm; do you see? There's just the one bed. A big double bed." Wild-eyed, she appealed to him. "How can Perky Pat and Leonard play against them?" Her voice shook. "It's not morally *right*."

"This is another type of layout entirely," Norm said to Walter Wynn. "This, that you have. Utterly different from what we're used to, as you can see." He pointed to his own layout. "I insist that in this game Connie and Paul *not* live together and *not* be considered married."

"But they are," Foster spoke up. "It's a fact. Look—their clothes are in the same closet." He showed them the closet. "And in the same bureau drawers." He showed them that, too. "And look in the bathroom. Two toothbrushes. His and hers, in the same rack. So you can see we're not making it up."

There was silence.

Then Fran said in a choked voice, "And if they're married—you mean they've been—intimate?"

Wynn raised an eyebrow, then nodded. "Sure, since they're married. Is there anything wrong with that?"

"Perky Pat and Leonard have never—" Fran began, and then ceased.

"Naturally not," Wynn agreed. "Because they're only going together. We understand that."

Fran said, "We just can't play. We can't." She caught hold of her husband's arm. "Let's go back to Pinole pit—please, Norman."

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"Wait," Wynn said, at once. "If you don't play, you're conceding; you have to give us Perky Pat."

The three Oaklanders all nodded. And, Norm saw, many of the Berkeley flukers were nodding, too, including Ben Fennimore.

"They're right," Norm said heavily to his wife. He put his arm around her. "We'd have to give her up. We better play, dear."

"Yes," Fran said, in a dead, flat voice. "We'll play." She bent down and listlessly spun the needle of the spinner. It stopped at six.

Smiling, Walter Wynn knelt down and spun. He obtained a four.

The game had begun.

CROUCHING behind the strewn, decayed contents of a care parcel that had been dropped long ago, Timothy Schein saw coming across the surface of ash his mother and father, pushing the wheelbarrow ahead of them. They looked tired and worn.

"Hi," Timothy yelled, leaping out at them in joy at seeing them again; he had missed them very much.

"Hi, son," his father murmured, nodding. He let go of the handles of the wheelbarrow, then, halted and wiped his face with his handkerchief.

Now Fred Chamberlain raced up, panting. "Hi, Mr. Schein; hi, Mrs. Schein. Hey, did you win? Did you beat the Oakland flukers? I bet you did, didn't you?" He looked from one of them to the other and then back.

In a low voice Fran said, "Yes, Freddy. We won."

Norm said, "Look in the wheelbarrow."

The two boys looked. And, there among Perky Pat's furnishings, lay another doll. Larger, fuller-figured, much older than Pat . . . they stared at her and she stared up sightlessly at the gray sky overhead. So this is Connie Companion doll, Timothy said to himself. Gee.

"We were lucky," Norm said. Now several people had emerged from the pit and were gathering around them, listening. Jean and Sam Regan, Tod Morrison and his wife Helen, and now their Mayor, Hooker Glebe himself, waddling up excited and nervous, his face flushed, gasping for breath from the labor—unusual for him—of ascending the ramp.

Fran said, "We got a cancellation of debts card, just when we were most behind. We owed fifty thousand, and it made us even with the Oakland flukers. And then, after that, we got an advance ten squares card, and that put us right on the jackpot square, at least in our layout. We had a very bitter squabble, be-

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cause the Oaklanders showed us that on their layout it was a tax lien slapped on real estate holdings square, but we had spun an odd number so that put us back on our own board." She sighed. "I'm glad to be back. It was hard, Hooker; it was a tough game."

Hooker Glebe wheezed, "Let's all get a look at the Connie Companion doll, folks." To Fran and Norm he said, "Can I lift her up and show them?"

"Sure," Norm said, nodding.

Hooker picked up Connie Companion doll. "She sure is realistic," he said, scrutinizing her. "Clothes aren't as nice as ours generally are; they look machine-made."

"They are," Norm agreed. "But she's carved, not poured."

"Yes, so I see." Hooker turned the doll about, inspecting her from all angles. "A nice job. She's—um, more filled-out than Perky Pat. What's this outfit she has on? Tweed suit of some sort."

"A business suit," Fran said. "We won that with her; they had agreed on that in advance."

"You see, she has a job," Norm explained. "She's a psychology consultant for a business firm doing marketing research. In consumer preferences. A high-paying position . . . she earns twenty thousand a year, I believe Wynn said."

"Golly," Hooker said. "And Pat's just going to college; she's still in school." He looked troubled. "Well, I guess they were bound to be ahead of us in some ways. What matters is that you won." His jovial smile returned. "Perky Pat came out ahead." He held the Connie Companion doll up high, where everyone could see her. "Look what Norm and Fran came back with, folks!"

Norm said, "Be careful with her, Hooker." His voice was firm.

"Eh?" Hooker said, pausing. "Why, Norm?"

"Because," Norm said, "she's going to have a baby."

THERE was a sudden chill silence. The ash around them stirred faintly; that was the only sound.

"How do you know?" Hooker asked.

"They told us. The Oaklanders told us. And we won that, too—after a bitter argument that Fennimore had to settle." Reaching into the wheelbarrow he brought out a little leather pouch; from it he carefully took a carved pink new-born baby. "We won this too because Fennimore agreed that from a technical standpoint it's literally part of Connie Companion doll at this point."

Hooker stared a long, long time.

"She's married," Fran explained. "To Paul. They're not just going together. She's three

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months pregnant, Mr. Wynn said. He didn't tell us until after we won; he didn't want to, then, but they felt they had to. I think they were right; it wouldn't have done not to say."

Norm said, "And in addition there's actually an embryo outfit—"

"Yes," Fran said. "You have to open Connie up, of course, to see—"

"No," Jean Regan said. "Please, no."

Hooker said, "No, Mrs. Schein, don't." He backed away.

Fran said, "It shocked us of course at first, but—"

"You see," Norm put in, "it's logical; you have to follow the logic. Why, eventually Perky Pat—"

"No," Hooker said violently. He bent down, picked up a rock from the ash at his feet. "No," he said, and raised his arm. "You stop, you two. Don't say any more."

Now the Regans, too, had picked up rocks. No one spoke.

Fran said, at last, "Norm, we've got to get out of here."

"You're right," Tod Morrison told them. His wife nodded in grim agreement.

"You two go back down to Oakland," Hooker told Norman and Fran Schein. "You don't live here any more. You're different than you were. You—changed."

"Yes," Sam Regan said slowly, half to himself. "I was right; there was something to fear." To Norm Schein he said, "How difficult a trip is it to Oakland?"

"We just went to Berkeley," Norm said. "To the Berkeley Fluke-pit." He seemed baffled and stunned by what was happening. "My god," he said, "we can't turn around and push this wheelbarrow back all the way to Berkeley again—we're worn out, we need rest!"

Sam Regan said, "What if somebody else pushed?" He walked up to the Scheins, then, and stood with them. "I'll push the darn thing. You lead the way, Schein." He looked toward his own wife, but Jean did not stir. And she did not put down her handful of rocks.

Timothy Schein plucked at his father's arm. "Can I come this time, Dad? Please let me come."

"Okay," Norm said, half to himself. Now he drew himself together. "So we're not wanted here." He turned to Fran. "Let's go. Sam's going to push the wheelbarrow; I think we can make it back there before nightfall. If not, we can sleep out in the open; Timothy'll help protect us against the do-cats."

Fran said, "I guess we have no choice." Her face was pale.

"And take this," Hooker said. He held out the tiny carved baby. Fran Schein accepted it and put it tenderly back in its leather

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pouch. Norm laid Connie Companion back down in the wheelbarrow, where she had been. They were ready to start back.

"It'll happen up here eventually," Norm said, to the group of people, to the Pinole flukers. "Oakland is just more advanced; that's all."

"Go on," Hooker Glebe said. "Get started."

Nodding, Norm started to pick up the handles of the wheelbarrow, but Sam Regan moved him aside and took them himself. "Let's go," he said.

THE three adults, with Timothy Schein going ahead of them with his knife ready—in case a do-cat attacked—started into motion, in the direction of Oakland and the south. No one spoke. There was nothing to say.

"It's a shame this had to happen," Norm said at last, when they had gone almost a mile and there was no further sign of the Pinole flukers behind them.

"Maybe not," Sam Regan said. "Maybe it's for the good." He did not seem downcast. And after all, he had lost his wife; he had given up more than anyone else, and yet—he had survived.

"Glad you feel that way," Norm said somberly.

They continued on, each with his own thoughts.

After awhile, Timothy said to his father, "All these big flukepits to the south . . . there's lots more things to do there, isn't there? I mean, you don't just sit around playing that game." He certainly hoped not.

His father said, "That's true, I guess."

Overhead, a care ship whistled at great velocity and then was gone again almost at once; Timothy watched it go but he was not really interested in it, because there was so much more to look forward to, on the ground and below the ground, ahead of them to the south.

His father murmured, "Those Oaklanders; their game, their particular doll, it taught them something. Connie had to grow and it forced them all to grow along with her. Our flukers never learned about that, not from Perky Pat. I wonder if they ever will. She'd have to grow up the way Connie did. Connie must have been like Perky Pat, once. A long time ago."

Not interested in what his father was saying—who really cared about dolls and games with dolls?—Timothy scampered ahead, peering to see what lay before them, the opportunities and possibilities, for him and for his mother and dad, for Mr. Regan also.

"I can't wait," he yelled back at his father, and Norm Schein managed a faint, fatigued smile in answer. THE END

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DOWN TO EARTH

By HARRY HARRISON

Illustrated by LUTJENS

Whatever goes up must come down. Including moon rockets.

But there's no law saying what they must come down to.

GINO . . . Gino . . . help me! For God's sake, do something!"

The tiny voice scratched in Gino Lombardi's earphone, weak against the background roar of solar interference. Gino lay flat in the lunar dust, half buried by the pumice-fine stuff, reaching far down into the cleft in the rock. Through the thick fabric of his suit he felt the edge crumbling and pulled hastily back. The dust and pieces of rock fell instantly, pulled down by the light lunar gravity and unimpeded by any trace of air. A fine mist of dust settled on Glazer's helmet below, partially obscuring his tortured face.

"Help me, Gino—get me out of here," he said, stretching his arm up over his head.

"No good—" Gino answered, putting as much of his weight onto the crumbling lip of rock as he dared, reaching far down. His hand was still a good yard short of the other's groping glove. "I can't reach you—and I've got nothing here I can let down for you to grab. I'm going back to the Bug."

"Don't leave . . ." Glazer called, but his voice was cut off as Gino slid back from the crevice and scrambled to his feet. Their tiny helmet radios did not have enough power to send a signal through the rock; they were good only for line-of-sight communication.

Gino ran as fast as he could, long gliding jumps one after the other back towards the Bug. It did look more like a bug here, a red beetle squatting on the lunar landscape, its four spidery support legs sunk into the dust. He cursed under his breath as he ran: what a hell of an ending for

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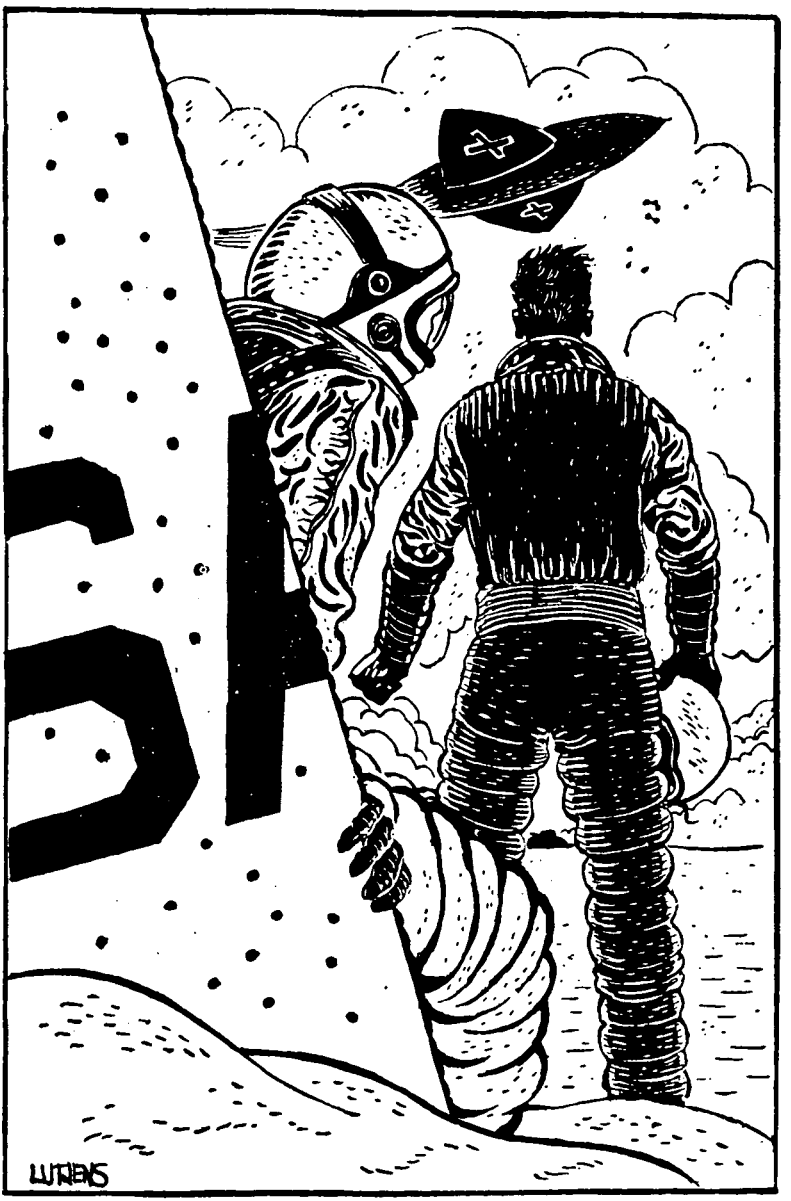

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the first moon flight! A good blast off and a perfect orbit, the first two stages had dropped on time, the lunar orbit was right, the landing had been right—and ten minutes after they had walked out of the Bug Glazer had to fall into this crevice hidden under the powdery dust. To come all this way—through all the multiple hazards of space—then to fall into a hole . . . There was just no justice.

AT the base of the ship Gino flexed his legs and bounded high up towards the top section of the Bug, grabbing onto the bottom of the still open door of the cabin. He had planned his moves while he ran—the magnetometer would be his best bet. Pulling it from the rack he yanked at its long cable until it came free in his hand, then turned back without wasting a second. It was a long leap back to the surface—in Earth gravitational terms—but he ignored the apparent danger and jumped, sinking knee deep in the dust when he landed. The row of scuffled tracks stretched out towards the slash of the lunar crevice and he ran all the way, chest heaving in spite of the pure oxygen he was breathing. Throwing himself flat he skidded and wriggled like a snake, back to the crumbling lip.

"Get ready, Glazer," he shouted, his head ringing inside the helmet with the captive sound of his own voice. "Grab the cable . . ."

The crevice was empty. More of the soft rock had crumbled away and Glazer had fallen from sight.

For a long time Major Gino Lombardi lay there, flashing his light into the seemingly bottomless slash in the satellite's surface, calling on his radio with the power turned full on. His only answer was static, and gradually be became aware of the cold from the eternally chilled rocks that was seeping through the insulation of his suit. Glazer was gone, that was all there was to it.

After this Gino did everything that he was supposed to do in a methodical, disinterested way. He took rock samples, dust samples, meter readings, placed the recording instruments exactly as he had been shown and fired the test shot in the drilled hole. Then he gathered the records from the instruments and when the next orbit of the Apollo spacecraft brought it overhead he turned on the cabin transmitter and sent up a call.

"Come in Dan . . . Colonel Danton Coye, can you hear me. . . . ?"

"Loud and clear," the speaker crackled. "Tell me you guys, how

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does it feel to be walking on the moon?"

"Glazer is dead. I'm alone. I have all the data and photographs required. Permission requested to cut this stay shorter than planned. No need for a whole day down here."

For long seconds there was a crackling silence, then Dan's voice came in, the same controlled, Texas drawl.

"Roger, Gino—stand by for computer signal, I think we can meet in the next orbit."

THE moon takeoff went as smoothly as the rehearsals had gone in the mock-up on Earth, and Gino was too busy doing double duty to have time to think about what had happened. He was strapped in when the computer radio signal fired the engines that burned down into the lower portion of the Bug and lifted the upper half free, blasting it up towards the rendezvous in space with the orbiting mother ship. The joined sections of the Apollo came into sight and Gino realized he would pass in front of it, going too fast: he made the course corrections with a sensation of deepest depression. The computer had not allowed for the reduced mass of the lunar rocket with only one passenger aboard. After this, matching orbits was not too difficult and minutes later Gino was crawling through the entrance of the command nodule and sealing it behind him. Dan Coye stayed at the controls, not saying anything until the cabin pressure had stabilized and they could remove their helmets.

"What happened down there, "Gino?"

"An accident—a crack in the lunar surface, covered lightly, sealed over by dust. Glazer just . . . fell into the thing. That's all. I tried to get him out, I couldn't reach him. I went to the Bug for some wire, but when I came back he had fallen deeper . . . it was . . ."

Gino had his face buried in his hands, and even he didn't know if he was sobbing or just shaking with fatigue and strain.

"I'll tell you a secret, I'm not superstitious at all," Dan said, reaching deep into a zippered pocket of his pressure suit. "Everybody thinks I am, which just goes to show you how wrong everybody can be. Now I got this mascot, because all pilots are supposed to have mascots, and it makes good copy for the reporters when things are dull." He pulled the little black rubber doll from his pocket, made famous on millions of TV screens, and waved it at Gino. "Everybody knows I always tote my little good-luck mascot with me, but nobody knows just what kind of good luck it has. Now *you* will

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find out, Major Gino Lombardi, and be privileged to share my luck. In the first place this bitty doll is not rubber, which might have a deleterious effect on the contents, but is constructed of a neutral plastic."

In spite of himself, Gino looked up as Dan grabbed the doll's head and screwed it back.

"Notice the wrist motion as I decapitate my friend, within whose bosom rests the best luck in the world, the kind that can only be brought to you by sour mash one-hundred and fifty proof bourbon. Have a slug." He reached across and handed the doll to Gino.

"Thanks, Dan." He raised the thing and squeezed, swallowing twice. He handed it back.

"Here's to a good pilot and a good joe, Eddie Glazer," Dan Coye said raising the flask, suddenly serious. "He wanted to get to the moon and he did. It belongs to him now, all of it, by right of occupation." He squeezed the doll dry and methodically screwed the head back on and replaced it in his pocket. "Now let's see what we can do about contacting control, putting them in the picture, and start cutting an orbit back towards Earth."

GINO turned the radio on but did not send out the call yet. While they had talked their orbit had carried them around to the other side of the moon and its bulk successfully blocked any radio communication with Earth. They hurtled their measured arc through the darkness and watched another sunrise over the sharp lunar peaks: then the great globe of the Earth swung into sight again. North America was clearly visible and there was no need to use repeater stations. Gino beamed the signal at Cape Canaveral and waited the two and a half seconds for his signal to be received and for the answer to come back the 480,000 miles from Earth. The seconds stretched on and on, and with a growing feeling of fear he watched the hand track slowly around the clock face.

"They don't answer . . ."

"Interference, sunspots . . . try them again," Dan said in a suddenly strained voice.

The control at Canaveral did not answer the next message, nor was there any response when they tried the emergency frequencies. They picked up some aircraft chatter on the higher frequencies, but no one noticed them or paid any attention to their repeated calls. They looked at the blue sphere of Earth, with horror now, and only after an hour of sweating strain would they admit that, for some unimaginable reason, they were cut off from all radio contact with it.

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"Whatever happened, happened during our last orbit around the moon. I was in contact with them while you were matching orbits," Dan said, tapping the dial of the ammeter on the radio. "There couldn't be anything wrong. . . ?"

"Not at this end," Gino said grimly. "But something has happened down there."

"Could it be . . . a war?"

"It might be. But with *whom* and why? There's nothing unusual on the emergency frequencies and I don't think . . ."

"*Look!*" Dan shouted hoarsely, "The lights—where are the lights?"

In their last orbit the twinkling lights of the American cities had been seen clearly through their telescope. The entire continent was now black.

"Wait, see South America—the cities are lit up there, Gino. What could possibly have happened at home while we were in that orbit?"

"There's only one way to find out. We're going back. With or without any help from ground control."

They disconnected the lunar Bug and strapped into their acceleration couches in the command module while they fed data to the computor. Following its instructions they jockeyed the Appollo into the correct attitude for firing. Once more they orbited the airless sattellite and at the correct instant the computor triggered the engines in the attached service module. They were heading home.

With all the negative factors taken into consideration, it was not that bad a landing. They hit the right continent and were only a few degrees off in latitude, though they entered the atmosphere earlier than they liked. Without ground control of any kind it was an almost miraculously good landing.

AS the capsule screamed down through the thickening air its immense velocity was slowed and the airspeed began to indicate a reasonable figure. Far below, the ground was visible through rents in the cloud cover.

"Late afternoon," Gino said. "It will be dark soon after we hit the ground."

"At least it will still be light. We could have been landing in Peking at midnight, so let's hear no complaints. Stand by to let go the parachutes."

The capsule jumped twice as the immense chutes boomed open. They opened their faceplates, safely back in the sea of air once more.

"Wonder what kind of reception we'll get?" Dan asked, rubbing the bristle on his big jaw.

With the sharp crack of split metal a row of holes appeared in

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the upper quadrant of the capsule: air whistled in, equalizing their lower pressure.

"Look!" Gino shouted, pointing at the dark shape that hurtled by outside. It was egg-shaped and stub-winged, black against the afternoon sun. Then it twisted over in a climbing turn and for a long moment its silver skin was visible to them as it arched over and came diving down. Back it came, growing instantly larger, red flames twinkling in its wing roots.

Grey haze cut off the sunlight as they fell into a cloud. Both men looked at each other: neither wanted to speak first.

"A jet," Gino finally said. "I never saw that type before."

"Neither did I—but there was something familiar—Look, you saw the wings didn't you? You saw. . . ?"

"If you mean did I see black crosses on the wings, yes I did, but I'm not going to admit it! Or I wouldn't if it wasn't for those new air-conditioning outlets that were just installed in our hull. Do you have any idea what it means?"

"None. But I don't think we'll be too long finding out. Get ready for the landing—just two thousand feet to go."

THE jet did not reappear. They tightened their safety harness and braced themselves for the impact. It was a bumping crash and the capsule tilted up on its side, jarring them with vibration.

"Parachute jettisons," Dan Coye ordered, "We're being dragged."

Gino had hit the triggers even as Dan spoke. The lurching stopped and the capsule slowly righted itself.

"Fresh air," Dan said and blew the charges on the port. It sprang away and thudded to the ground. As they disconnected the multiple wires and clasps of their suits hot, dry air poured in through the opening, bringing with it the dusty odor of the desert.

Dan raised his head and sniffed. "Smells like home. Let's get out of this tin box."

Colonel Danton Coye went first, as befitted the commander of the First American Earth-Moon Expedition. Major Gino Lombardi followed. They stood side by side silently, with the late afternoon sun glinting on their silver suits. Around them, to the limits of vision, stretched the thin tangle of greyish desert shrub, mesquite, cactus. Nothing broke the silence nor was there any motion other than that caused by the breeze that was carrying away the cloud of dust stirred up by their landing.

"Smells good, smells like Texas," Dan said, sniffing.

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"Smells awful, just makes me thirsty. But . . . Dan . . . what happened? First the radio contact, then that jet . . ..."

"Look, our answer is coming from over there," the big officer said, pointing at a moving column of dust rolling in from the horizon. "No point in guessing, because we are going to find out in five minutes."

It was less than that. A large, sand-colored half-track roared up, followed by two armored cars. They braked to a halt in the immense cloud of their own dust. The half-track's door slammed open and a goggled man climbed down, brushing dirt from his tight black uniform.

"*Hande hoch!*" he ordered, waving their attention to the leveled guns on the armored cars. "Hands up and keep them that way. You are my prisoners."

They slowly raised their arms as though hypnotized, taking in every detail of his uniform. The silver lightning bolts on the lapels, the high, peaked cap—the predatory eagle clasping a swastika.

"You're—you're a *German!*" Gino Lombardi gasped.

"Very observant," the officer observed humorlessly. "I am Hauptmann Langenscheidt. You are my prisoners. You will obey my orders. Get into the *kraftwagen*."

"Now just one minute," Dan protested. "I'm Col. Coye, USAF and I would like to know what is going on here . . ."

"Get in," the officer ordered. He did not change his tone of voice, but he did pull his long-barreled Luger from its holster and leveled it at them.

"Come on," Gino said, putting his hand on Dan's tense shoulder. "You outrank him, but he got there fustest with the mostest."

They climbed into the open back of the half-track and the captain sat down facing them. Two silent soldiers with leveled machine-pistols sat behind their backs. The tracks clanked and they surged forward: stifling dust rose up around them.

GINO Lombardi had trouble accepting the reality of this. The moon flight, the landing, even Glazer's death he could accept, they were things that could be understood. But this. . . ? He looked at his watch, at the number twelve in the calendar opening.

"Just one question, Langenscheidt," he shouted above the roar of the engine. "Is today the twelfth of September?"

His only answer was a stiff nod.

"And the year—of course it is—1971?"

"Yes, of course. No more ques-

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tions. You will talk to the *Oberst*, not to me."

They were silent after that, trying to keep the dust out of their eyes. A few minutes later they pulled aside and stopped while the long, heavy form of a tank transporter rumbled by them, going in the opposite direction. Evidently the Germans wanted the capsule as well as the men who had arrived in it. When the long vehicle had passed the half-track ground forward again. It was growing dark when the shapes of two large tanks loomed up ahead, cannons following them as they bounced down the rutted track. Behind these sentries was a car park of other vehicles, tents and the ruddy glow of gasoline fires burning in buckets of sand. The half-track stopped before the largest tent and at gunpoint the two astronauts were pushed through the entrance.

An officer, his back turned to them, sat writing at a field desk. He finished his work while they stood there, then folded some papers and put them into a case. He turned around, a lean man with burning eyes that he kept fastened on his prisoners while the captain made a report in rapid German.

"That is most interesting, Langenschedt, but we must not keep our guests standing. Have the orderly bring some chairs. Gentlemen permit me to introduce myself. I am Colonel Schneider, commander of the 109th Panzer division that you have been kind enough to visit. Cigarette?"

The colonel's smile just touched the corners of his mouth, then instantly vanished. He handed over a flat package of Player's cigarettes to Gino, who automatically took them. As he shook one out he saw that they were made in England—but the label was printed in German.

"And I'm sure you would like a drink of whisky," Schneider said, flashing the artificial smile again. He placed a bottle of *Ould Highlander* on the table before them, close enough for Gino to read the label. There was a picture of the highlander himself, complete with bagpipes and kilt, but he was saying *Ich hätte gern etwas zu trinken WHISKEY!*

The orderly pushed a chair against the back of Gino's legs and he collapsed gratefully into it. He sipped from the glass when it was handed to him—it was good scotch whisky. He drained it in a single swallow.

THE orderly went out and the commanding officer settled back into his camp chair, also holding a large drink. The only reminder of their captivity was the silent form of the captain

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near the entrance, his hand resting on his holstered gun.

"A most interesting vehicle that you gentlemen arrived in. Our technical experts will of course examine it, but there is a question—"

"I am Colonel Danton Coye, United States Air Force, serial number . . ."

"Please, colonel," Schneider interrupted. "We can dispense with the formalities . . ."

"Major Giovanni Lombardi, United States Air Force," Gino broke in, then added his serial number. The German colonel flickered his smile again and sipped from his drink.

"Do not take me for a fool," he said suddenly, and for the first time the cold authority in his voice matched his grim appearance. "You will talk for the Gestapo, so you might just as well talk to me. And enough of your childish games. I know there is no American Air Force, just your Army Air Corps that has provided such fine targets for our fliers. Now—what were you doing in that device?"

"That is none of your business, Colonel," Dan snapped back in the same tones. "What I would like to know is, just what are German tanks doing in Texas?"

A roar of gunfire cut through his words, sounding not too far away. There were two heavy explosions and distant flames lit up the entrance to the tent. Captain Langenscheidt pulled his gun and rushed out of the tent while the others leaped to their feet. There was a muffled cry outside and a man stepped in, pointing a bulky, strange looking pistol at them. He was dressed in stained khaki and his hands and face were painted black.

"*Verdamm* . . ." the colonel gasped and reached for his own gun: the newcomer's pistol jumped twice and emitted two sighing sounds. The panzer officer clutched his stomach and doubled up on the floor.

"Don't just stand there gaping, boys," the intruder said, "get moving before anyone else wanders in here." He led the way from the tent and they followed.

They slipped behind a row of parked trucks and crouched there while a squad of scuttle-helmeted soldiers ran by them towards the hammering guns. A cannon began firing and the flames started to die down. Their guide leaned back and whispered.

"That's just a diversion—just six guys and a lot of noise—though they did get one of the fuel trucks. These krautheads are going to find it out pretty quickly and start heading back here on the double. So let's make tracks—*now!*"

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HE slipped from behind the trucks and the three of them ran into the darkness of the desert. After a few yards the astronauts were staggering, but they kept on until they almost fell into an arroyo where the black shape of a jeep was sitting. The motor started as they hauled themselves into it and, without lights, it ground up out of the arroyo and bumped through the brush.

"You're lucky I saw you come down," their guide said from the front seat. "I'm Lieutenant Reeves."

"Colonel Coye—and this is Major Lombardi. We owe you a lot of thanks, lieutenant. When those Germans grabbed us, we found it almost impossible to believe. Where did they come from?"

"Breakthrough, just yesterday from the lines around Corpus. I been slipping along behind this division with my patrol, keeping San Antone posted on their movements. That's how come I saw your ship, or whatever it is, dropping right down in front of their scouts. Stars and stripes all over it. I tried to reach you first, but had to turn back before their scout cars spotted me. But it worked out. We grabbed the tank carrier as soon as it got dark and two of my walking wounded are riding it back to Cotulla where we got some armor and transport. I set the rest of the boys to pull that diversion and you know the results. You Air Corps jockeys ought to watch which way the wind is blowing or something, or you'll have all your fancy new gadgets falling into enemy hands."

"You said the Germans broke out of Corpus—Corpus Christi?" Dan asked. "What are they doing there—how long have they been there—or where did they come from in the first place?"

"You flyboys must sure be stationed in some hideaway spot," Reeves said, grunting as the jeep bounded over a ditch. "The landings on the Texas side of the Gulf were made over a month ago. We been holding them, but just barely. Now they're breaking out and we're managing to stay ahead of them." He stopped and thought for a moment. "Maybe I better not talk to you boys too much until we know just what you were doing there in the first place. Sit tight and we'll have you out of here inside of two hours."

The other jeep joined them soon after they hit a farm road and the lieutenant murmured into the field radio it carried. Then the two cars sped north, past a number of tank traps and gun emplacements and finally

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into the small town of Cotula, straddling the highway south of San Antonio. They were led into the back of the local supermarket where a command post had been set up. There was a lot of brass and armed guards about, and a heavy-jawed one star general behind the desk. The atmosphere and the stares was reminiscent in many ways of the German colonel's tent.

"Who are you two, what are you doing here—and what is that *thing* you rode down in?" the general asked in a no-nonsense voice.

Dan had a lot of questions he wanted to ask first, but he knew better than to argue with a general. He told about the moon flight, the loss of communication, and their return. Throughout the general looked at him steadily, nor did he change his expression. He did not say a word until Dan was finished. Then he spoke.

"Gentlemen, I don't know what to make of all your talk of rockets, moon-shots, Russian sputniks or the rest. Either you are both mad or I am, though I admit you have an impressive piece of hardware out on that tank carrier. I doubt if the Russians have time or resources now for rocketry, since they are slowly being pulverized and pushed back across Siberia. Every other country in Europe has fallen to the Nazis and they have brought their war to this hemisphere, have established bases in Central America, occupied Florida and made more landings along the Gulf coast. I can't pretend to understand what is happening here so I'm sending you off to the national capitol in Denver in the morning."

IN the plane next day, somewhere over the high peaks of the Rockies, they pieced together part of the puzzle. Lieutenant Reeves rode with them, ostensibly as a guide, but his pistol was handy and the holster flap loose.

"It's the same date and the same world that we left," Gino explained, "but some things are *different*. Too many things. It's all the same up to a point, then changes radically. Reeves, didn't you tell me that President Roosevelt died during his first term?"

"Pneumonia, he never was too strong, died before he had finished a year in office. He had a lot of wild-sounding schemes but they didn't help. Vice-president Garner took over, but it didn't seem the same when John Nance said it as when Roosevelt had said it. Lot's of fights, trouble in congress, depression got worse, and things didn't start getting better until about '36 when Landon was elected. There

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were still a lot of people out of work, but with the war starting in Europe they were buying lots of things from us, food, machines, even guns."

"Britain and the allies, you mean?"

"I mean everybody, Germans too, though that made a lot of people here mad. But the policy was no-foreign-entanglements and do business with anyone who's willing to pay. It wasn't until the invasion of Britain that people began to realize that the Nazis weren't the best customers in the world, but by then it was too late."

"It's like a mirror image of the world—a warped mirror," Dan said, drawing savagely on his cigarette. "While we were going around the moon something happened to change the whole world to the way it would have been if history had been altered some time in the early thirties."

"World didn't change, boys," Reeves said, "it's always been just the way it is now. Though I admit the way you tell it it sounds a lot better. But it's either the whole world or you, and I'm banking on the simpler of the two. Don't know what kind of an experiment the Air Corps had you two involved in but it must have addled your grey matter."

"I can't buy that," Gino insisted. "I know I'm beginning to feel like I have lost my marbles, but whenever I do I think about the capsule we landed in. How are you going to explain that away?"

"I'm not going to try. I know there are a lot of gadgets and things that got the engineers and the university profs tearing their hair out, but that doesn't bother me. I'm going back to the shooting war where things are simpler. Until it is proved differently I think that you are both nuts, if you'll pardon the expression, sirs."

THE official reaction in Denver was basically the same. A staff car, complete with MP outriders, picked them up as soon as they had landed at Lowry Field and took them directly to Fitzsimmons Hospital. They were taken directly to the laboratories and what must have been a good half of the giant hospital's staff took turns prodding, questioning and testing them. They were encouraged to speak —many times with lie-detector instrumentation attached to them—but none of their questions were answered. Occasional high-ranking officers looked on gloomily, but took no part in the examination. They talked for hours into tape recorders, answering questions in every possible field from history to phys-

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ics, and when they tired were kept going on benzedrine. There was more than a week of this in which they saw each other only by chance in the examining rooms, until they were weak from fatigue and hazy from the drugs. None of their questions were answered, they were just reassured that everything would be taken care of as soon as the examinations were over. When the interruption came it was a welcome surprise, and apparently unexpected. Gino was being probed by a drafted history professor who wore oxidized captain's bars and a gravy-stained battlejacket. Since his voice was hoarse from the days of prolonged questioning, Gino held the microphone close to his mouth and talked in a whisper.

"Can you tell me who was the Secretary of the Treasury under Lincoln?" the captain asked.

"How the devil should I know? And I doubt very much if there is anyone else in this hospital who knows—besides you. And do you know?"

"Of course—"

The door burst open and a full colonel with an MP brassard looked in. A very high-ranking messenger boy: Gino was impressed.

"I've come for Major Lombardi."

"You'll have to wait," the history-captain protested, twisting his already rumpled necktie. "I've not finished. . . ."

"That is not important. The major is to come with me at once."

They marched silently through a number of halls until they came to a dayroom where Dan was sprawled deep in a chair smoking a cigar. A loudspeaker on the wall was muttering in a monotone.

"Have a cigar," Dan called out, and pushed the package across the table.

"What's the drill now?" Gino asked, biting off the end and looking for a match.

"Another conference, big brass, lots of turmoil. We'll go in in a moment as soon as some of the shouting dies down. There is a theory now as to what happened, but not much agreement on it even though Einstein himself dreamed it up . . ."

"Einstein! But he's dead . . ."

"Not now he isn't, I've seen him. A grand old gent of over ninety, as fragile as a stick but still going strong. He . . . say, wait—isn't that a news broadcast?"

THEY listened to the speaker that one of the MP's had turned up.

". . . in spite of fierce fighting the city of San Antonio is now in enemy hands. Up to an hour ago there were still reports

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from the surrounded Alamo where units of the 5th Cavalry have refused to surrender, and all America has been following this second battle of the Alamo. History has repeated itself, tragically, because there now appears to be no hope that any survivors . . ."

"Will you gentlemen please follow me," a staff officer broke in, and the two astronauts went out after him. He knocked at a door and opened it for them. "If you please."

"I am very happy to meet you both," Albert Einstein said, and waved them to chairs.

He sat with his back to the window, his thin, white hair catching the afternoon sunlight and making an aura about his head.

"Professor Einstein," Dan Coye said, "can you tell us what has happened? What has changed?"

"Nothing has changed, that is the important thing that you must realize. The world is the same and you are the same, but you have—for want of a better word I must say—*moved.* I am not being clear. It is easier to express in mathematics."

"Anyone who climbs into a rocket has to be a bit of a science fiction reader, and I've absorbed my quota," Dan said. "Have we got into one of those parallel worlds things they used to write about, branches of time and all that?"

"No, what you have done is *not* like that, though it may be a help to you to think of it that way. This is the same *objective* world that you left—but not the same *subjective* one. There is only one galaxy that we inhabit, only one universe. But our awareness of it changes many of its aspects of reality."

"You've lost me," Gino sighed.

"Let me see if I get it," Dan said. "It sounds like you are saying that things are just as we think we see them, and our thinking keeps them that way. Like that tree in the quad I remember from college."

"Again not correct, but an approximation you may hold if it helps you to clarify your thinking. It is a phenomenon that I have long suspected, certain observations in the speed of light that might be instrumentation errors, gravitic phenomena, chemical reactions. I have suspected something, but have not known where to look. I thank you gentlemen from the bottom of my heart for giving me this opportunity at the very end of my life, for giving me the clues that may lead to a solution to this problem."

"Solution . . ." Gino's mouth opened. "Do you mean there is a chance we can go back to the world as we knew it?"

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"Not only a chance—but the strongest possibility. What happened to you was an accident. You were away from the planet of your birth, away from its atmospheric envelope and, during parts of your orbit, even out of sight of it. Your sense of reality was badly strained, and your physical reality and the reality of your mental relationships changed by the death of your comrade. All these combined to allow you to return to a world with a slightly different aspect of reality from the one you have left. The historians have pinpointed the point of change. It occurred on the seventeenth of August, 1933, the day that President Roosevelt died of pneumonia."

"Is that why all those medical questions about my childhood?" Dan asked. "I had pneumonia then, I was just a couple of months old, almost died, my mother told me about it often enough afterwards. It could have been at the same time. It isn't possible that I lived and the president died. . . ?"

Einstein shook his head. "No, you must remember that you both lived in the world as you knew it. The dynamics of the relationship are far from clear, though I do not doubt that there is some relationship involved. But that is not important. What is important is that I think I have developed a way to mechanically bring about the translation from one reality aspect to another. It will take years to develop it to translate matter from one reality to a different order, but it is perfected enough now—I am sure—to return matter that has already been removed from another order."

GINO's chair scraped back as he jumped to his feet. "Professor—am I right in saying, and I may have got you wrong, that you can take us and pop us back to where we came from?"

Einstein smiled. "Putting it as simply as you have, major . . . the answer is *yes*. Arrangements are being made now to return both of you and your capsule as soon as possible. In return for which we ask you a favor."

"Anything, of course," Dan said, leaning forward.

"You will have the reality-translator machine with you, and microcopies of all our notes, theories and practical conclusions. In the world that you come from all of the massive forces of technology and engineering can be summoned to solve the problem of mechanically accomplishing what you both did once by accident. You might be able to do this within months, and that is all the time that there is left."

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"Exactly what do you mean?"

"We are losing the war. In spite of all the warning we were not prepared, we thought it would never come to us. The Nazis advance on all fronts. It is only a matter of time until they win. We can still win, but only with your atom bombs."

"You don't have atomic bombs now?" Gino asked.

Einstein sat silent for a moment before he answered. "No, there was no opportunity. I have always been sure that they could be constructed, but have never put it to the test. The Germans felt the same, and at one time even had a heavy water project that aimed towards controlled nuclear fission. But their military successes were so great that they abandoned it along with other far-fetched and expensive schemes such as the hollow-globe theory. I myself have never wanted to see this hellish thing built, and from what you have told about it, it is worse than my most terrible dream. But I have approached the President about it, when the Nazi threat was closing in, but nothing was done. Too expensive. Now it is too late. But perhaps it isn't. If *your* America will help us, the enemy will be defeated. And after that, what a wealth of knowledge we shall have once our worlds are in contact. Will you do it?"

"Of course," Dan Coye said. "But the brass will take a lot of convincing. I suggest some films be made of you and others explaining some of this. And enclose some documents, anything that will help convince them what has happened."

"I can do something better," Einstein said, taking a small bottle from a drawer of the table. "Here is a recently developed drug, and the formula, that has proved effective in arresting certain of the more violent forms of cancer. This is an example of what I mean by the profit that can accrue when our two worlds can exchange information."

Dan pocketed the precious bottle as they turned to leave. With a sense of awe they gently shook hands with the frail old man who had been dead many years in the world they knew, to which they would be soon returning.

THE military moved fast. A large jet bomber was quickly converted to carry one of the American solid-fuel rocket missiles. Not yet operational, it was doubtful if they ever would be at the rate of the Nazi advance. But given an aerial boost by the bomber it could reach up out of the ionosphere—carrying the payload of the moon capsule with its two pilots. Clearing the fringes of the atmosphere was essential to the operation of the

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instrument that was to return them to what they could only think of as their own world. It seemed preposterously tiny to be able to change worlds.

"Is that *all?*" Gino asked when they settled themselves back into the capsule. A square case, containing records and reels of film, was strapped between their seats. On top of it rested a small grey metal box.

"What do you expect—an atom smasher?" Dan asked, checking out the circuits. The capsule had been restored as much as was possible to the condition it was in the day it had landed. The men wore their pressure suits. "We came here originally by accident, by just thinking wrong or something like that, if my theory's correct."

"It isn't—but neither is mine, so we can't let it bug us."

"Yeah, I see what you mean. The whole crazy business may not be simple, but the mechanism doesn't have to be physically complex. All we have to do is throw the switch, right?"

"Roger. The thing is self-powered. We'll be tracked by radar, and when we hit apogee in our orbit they'll give us a signal on our usual operating frequency. We throw the switch—and drop."

"Drop right back to where we came from, I hope."

"Hello there cargo," a voice crackled over the speaker. "Pilot here. We are about to take off. All set?"

"In the green, all circuits," Dan reported, and settled back.

The big bomber rumbled the length of the field and slowly pulled itself into the air, heavily under the weight of the rocket slung beneath its belly. The capsule was in the nose of the rocket and all the astronauts could see was the shining skin of the mother ship. It was a rough ride. The mathematics had indicated that probability of success would be greater over Florida and the south Atlantic, the original reentry target. This meant penetrating enemy territory. The passengers could not see the battle being fought by the accompanying jet fighters, and the pilot of the converted bomber did not tell them. It was a fierce battle and at one point almost a lost one: only a suicidal crash by one of the escort fighters prevented an enemy jet from attacking the mother ship.

"Stand by for drop," the radio said, and a moment later came the familiar sensation of free fall as the rocket cropped clear of the plane. Pre-set controls timed the ignition and orbit. Acceleration pressed them into their couches.

A SUDDEN return to weightlessness was accompanied

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by the tiny explosions as the carrying-rocket blasted free the explosive bolts that held it to the capsule. For a measureless time their inertia carried them higher in their orbit while gravity tugged back. The radio crackled with a carrier wave, then a voice broke in.

"Be ready with the switch . . . ready to throw it . . . NOW!"

Dan flipped the switch and nothing happened. Nothing that they could perceive in any case. They looked at each other silently, then at the altimeter as they dropped back towards the distant Earth.

"Get ready to open the chute," Dan said heavily, just as a roar of sound burst from the radio.

"Hello Apollo, is that you? This is Canaveral control, can you hear me? Repeat—can you hear me? Can you answer . . . in heaven's name, Dan, are you there . . . are you there. . . ?"

The voice was almost hysterical, bubbling over itself. Dan flipped the talk button.

"Dan Coye here—is that you, Skipper?"

"Yes—but how did you get there? Where have you been since . . . Cancel, repeat cancel that last. We have you on the screen and you will hit in the sea and we have ships standing by . . ."

The two astronauts met each other's eyes and smiled. Gino raised his thumb up in a token of victory. They had done it. Behind the controlled voice that issued them instructions they could feel the riot that must be breaking after their unexpected arrival. To the observers on Earth—*this* Earth—they must have vanished on the other side of the moon. Then reappeared suddenly some weeks later, alive and sound long days after their oxygen and supplies should have been exhausted. There would be a lot to explain.

It was a perfect landing. The sun shone, the sea was smooth, there was scarcely any cross wind. They resurfaced within seconds and had a clear view through their port over the small waves. A cruiser was already headed their way, only a few miles off.

"It's over," Dan said with an immense sigh of relief as he unbuckled himself from the chair.

"Over!" Gino said in a choking voice. "Over? Look—look at the flag there!"

The cruiser turned tightly, the flag on its stern standing out proudly in the air. The red and white stripes of Old Glory, the fifty white stars on the field of deepest blue.

And in the middle of the stars, in the center of the blue rectangle, lay a golden crown.

THE END

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In the shadow of the eclipse three people battled silently for the right of a boy to live his own life, dream his own dreams.

WHEN THE MOON WA

By KATE WILHELM

WHEN the school officials first discussed Robbie with Shelley, she wasn't exactly surprised; pleased certainly, but with an inner feeling of vindication. Robbie wasn't quite eleven then and she had known for three or four years that he was mentally superior to his playmates and school friends. Not that he made any attempt to outstrip them in any way, it merely happened. When his cousin, Stevie, began collecting rocks, Robbie checked out half a dozen lapidary books and organized the collection systematically until Stevie gave it up in disgust. The collection was now quite valuable even though it did gather dust in the basement.

Frank had also got interested

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in rocks, and had made show cases for them which he regularly—for a time—exhibited to all callers.

And the year Robbie had his eighth birthday party and had been given that hideous mud puppy. She had caught him carefully dissecting it with a razor blade on the kitchen table and drawing its insides on her monogrammed stationary. Frank had stayed the spanking she thought he deserved that time, and he had set up a regular operating table in the basement and proceeded to show Robbie how they had done it when he was in school. Robbie had sneaked away leaving him down there talking to the empty gray walls, looking foolishly at the mangled frog before him.

Robbie's stamp collection was under lock and key. "Good Lord, Shelley!" Frank had exploded when she protested, "the kid's stumbled across a sixty-five dollar stamp! First thing you know he'll trade it for a bb gun or something."

"He didn't stumble across it, Frank. He did some hard trading to get it," Shelley retorted.

"When he's older he'll enjoy it more, and appreciate it more. Just last night he knocked the whole book off the table when I tried to help him locate a violet Hamilton. He's too young for stuff like that."

Shelley looked at him calmly, "He didn't want any help. He didn't think he needed any."

"I still say he's too young. When he learns how to take care of it that's time enough."

Shelley had given it up at that. Robbie was hardier than she was; he could fight it his own way. She had watched him fighting it his own way for all of his ten years it seemed. He would start something, Frank would interfere, and he would wander away from it. While Frank was at his office, or on one of his business trips that kept him away nearly as much as he was there, Robbie's interests would reappear, still very much operative, but he filled in those other hours with other things. Robbie was very hardy.

Still it had come as a pleasure for the school authorities to recognize that he needed the challenge of the advanced program. He was not a genius, they were quick to declare, and that too she had known. But he was very intelligent, and under the present circumstances, it was felt that the more intellectually able youngsters should be given the opportunity to develop their abilities.

Frank's reaction had been typical, she thought wryly. He had bought a new encyclopedia set for seven hundred dollars,

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had built book shelves in Robbie's room and crammed them with books the saleslady had assured him were fundamental for a genius. So far Robbie had by and large ignored them, preferring to check out his own selections of dogeared, smeary library books every Saturday. As often as not they included one horse story, one science fiction adventure and one that ranged from mythology through King Arthur, poetry, riddles or puns. Very bad puns that sent him into howls of laughter. He never checked more than three, and never returned one unread. He could lie across his bed immersed in the world of print for hours. Or in the living room oblivious of the television and of Beatrice's attempts to draw him into a game. Beatrice adored him, annoyed and pestered him, and at times seemed to be his main source of amusement. Robbie was good to her and his teasing was humorous rather than malicious. But most often he appeared unaware of her and his gleaming black hair tumbled on his forehead as the greater part of him departed through the gate of words leaving the handsome well-built body that no one could distract.

Shelley half listened to Beatrice sounding out the words in her first grade reader, and really listened to the sounds emanating from the basement. "What dear?" she asked at the impatient tug on her arm. " 'Pleasant' " she read and Beatrice continued chanting the adventures of Dick and Jane.

What could he be doing? Shelley wondered as she absently corrected Beatrice. He had taken his old record player and the alarm clock from his room and disappeared to the basement immediately after dinner. Finally it was time for Beatrice's bath and bed, and she started down the stairs. Robbie met her at the bottom, grinning happily.

"Finished, Robbie?" Shelley hid the disappointment and started to retrace her steps.

He hesitated only a moment and then asked shyly, "Want to see what I'm doing?"

Shelley followed him to the workshop area and watched as he plugged in the record player. "I fixed it so it only makes fifteen revolutions a minute, and I took out the spindle. But I can put it back and speed it up again," he added hurriedly.

"What's it for, Robbie? The records won't play that slowly, will they?"

"No, I'm going to grind a mirror for a telescope on it. You have to make a parabolic curve in the mirror and the book said to put the tool on a barrel and keep walking around it while you

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grind, but I couldn't find a barrel anywhere so I thought this would give the same evenness."

"A telescope!" Shelley's mind flashed a picture of the observatory at that mountain in California and she shuddered involuntarily. "A telescope," she repeated weakly.

"Yes. I used my Christmas money for the kit. Ten dollars for the mirror blank and the tool and the pitch and all the grits and rouge. That's all right, isn't it? You said I could do anything I wanted to with it." His eyes, so deep a blue that they appeared black, fixed on her intently.

"But, Robbie, why didn't you mention it? When did you order it?"

"Last week," he said and became interested in the insulation of the extension cord he had connected to the record player. "I just forgot to say anything I guess." His gaze shifted and concentrated on his toes which immediately began to wiggle.

Shelley wanted to hug him to ease the ache that suddenly made her blink hard. Instead she said casually, "I suppose you have the instructions and books and everything in school, don't you?" He nodded without speaking and she added thoughtfully, "You know, your father will be gone the last two weeks of February. What a nice surprise this would be for him to find finished when he gets home then."

Robbie's quick look of gratitude erased any guilt she may have felt and she continued, "Why don't you put off your homework until after dinner for the next week or so and you could spend some time down here after you get home from school every day. You won't be in your father's way if he wants to do anything down here that way." His smile of relief had to substitute for the kiss she halfway expected, and she reflected again on how fast he was leaving childhood behind.

They moved the record player to the table by her washer and covered it with an old sheet before they went upstairs, and when Frank returned from his bowling league they were in the living room watching television.

The grinding was slower than Shelley had thought possible and several times she actually bit her tongue to keep from volunteering to help. Robbie stood over the revolving turntable rubbing the mirror blank back and forth over the protesting grit on the face of the tool until she felt she could cry for him. Patiently he explained that it would be a six-inch Newtonian type with a focal length of forty-eight inches, if all went well. He would need a tube, but he had located a source,

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if she could get it in the car for him—the man said they couldn't deliver just one aluminum tube. And he had the lenses for the eyepiece, but someday he'd like to get a Barlow lens. He hadn't figured out the clock drive for the mount, but that would come later after the telescope was finished. The mounting was the least important part of it because it could be changed any time, but the mirror, that was different. It had to be right the first time, or all the work was for nothing. Shelley listened and made sounds without meaning, feeling awed and not a little frightened by this serious faced child of hers.

Beatrice was asleep and Frank still gone when Robbie called her to see the last flame test before he started the fine polishing of the mirror. She hurried down the stairs feeling almost as much excitement as there was in his voice.

"It's really working, Mom. Look!" The basement was in darkness but for the candle he held high for her. The mirror sat on edge, wedged by books so that it couldn't roll, and back from it about six feet stood Robbie holding the candle. It was like an ancient, and slightly illicit rite of some sort, Shelley thought irrationally. "Watch," Robbie commanded.

He stooped on his haunches and moved the candle back and forth slowly until he was satisfied and then called her to kneel and look. "See," he said, "it fills the face of the mirror. One bright glob of light. Now watch." He moved the candle back perhaps an inch and it was reflected back to them inverted, a clear cut flame burning upside down. "Six feet!" he said jubilantly. "Boy! the books says that's good! It will come down another foot during the polishing."

"There's more?" Shelley asked as she straightened above the boy.

"Sure," Robbie replied quickly. "You've got to polish almost as long as the grinding took in the first place. That completes the correct curve while it polishes. Then you silver it."

"How?" Shelley asked, forcing herself to sit in the chair and merely watch as he reverently lifted the mirror and replaced it in the special carton he had devised to keep it from dust, and Beatrice.

"Well," he admitted, "I won't do that part. Mr. Lindstrom said he could do it for me if I wanted him to."

"Oh, Mr. Lindstrom knows about it already." Shelley wished the words back before she finished them and she watched the guilty look flicker across Rob-

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bie's face. "Is he interested in astronomy?"

"Sure he is. He said if I hit a snag to give him a ring, and when I'm ready to silver it to bring it over." Mr. Lindstrom was his science teacher. There had been a period of several weeks when his name had cropped up every third sentence Robbie uttered until one night Frank had erupted.

"My God, what is this Lindstrom character? Some sort of high priest or something? If he's so good what's he doing stuck away teaching kids, why isn't he making a decent living like other men doing men's work?"

"Frank!" Shelley had exclaimed, "Stop that. Mr. Lindstrom is completely devoted to teaching. We're lucky to have him."

"Maybe," Frank said with his mouth full of blackberry pie, "but the way I heard it, a man takes up teaching after he's failed at everything else."

Robbie hadn't said another word, hadn't even given his father a reproachful glance, but somehow he gave Shelley the feeling that he had gathered himself in, had tested his muscles and, finding them insufficient had decided to wait. That was the last time until now that he had even spoken Lindstrom's name.

"Do you have any cheese cloth?" Robbie asked abruptly, his attempt to change the subject painfully apparent even to him.

"I think so," Shelley said.

"Would you do something for me?"

Shelley mixed the jeweler's rouge with the correct amount of water and strained it through five thicknesses of cheesecloth as he directed while he carefully cleaned off the thick glass tool in a bucket of hot sudsy water. He vacuumed the area fastidiously and wrapped his rags and old papers he used under the record player in newspaper. Feeling perplexed and stupid Shelley watched without questioning him. Only after the table top and surrounding space was spotless did he inform her of the next step.

"I had to make sure none of the carborundum grit is around so it won't get on the mirror and scratch it. Now I have to melt the pitch and make what the book calls a pitch lap," he told her while he broke the pitch into a coffee can. "I have to pour the hot pitch on the tool and when it starts to get a little cool I put the mirror on it to shape it to the curve. That's why I needed the rouge now. It keeps the mirror from sticking to the pitch."

Shelley watched him anxiously as he stirred the hot pitch melting in the can. She wanted to

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say, be careful, darling, hurry. Your father is coming home tomorrow and he'll be home for the rest of the week and all week-end. Not again, she prayed, please not again. It isn't fair to Robbie. Absently he picked at his nose as he stirred and she thought, he's so young. Too young to have to cope with it yet. They heard the footsteps overhead at the same time and Robbie turned suddenly stricken eyes to her as the voice called, "Hey, where's everybody? What is burning?"

Shelley ran across the basement to the stairs but Frank was already halfway down. "Confucious say," he boomed, "man who comes home early must be prepared to find wife unprepared. But he didn't say she'd be trying to burn down the house. What's going on?"

"Frank, you're early. A whole day. Come on, let's find something to eat." Shelley tried to plant herself between him and Robbie, but his eyes swept over her head and he laughed.

"Hi, son," he yelled jovially. "Ol' Dad's back from the battles of commerce. What's cooking?" He laughed heartily and enwrapped Shelley in one arm as he crossed to the camp stove Robbie was using. "What's that?"

"Pitch," Robbie said in a small voice not looking up from it.

"For God's sake, Shelley! Don't you know that stuff's dangerous to mess with!" He drew away from Shelley who caught at his arm, pulled it free without another glance at her. "Back up, son, and let Dad have a crack at it. What's it for?"

"Frank," Shelley said desperately, "he's being careful. Come on up and tell me about the trip."

"Later," Frank said absently paying no attention to her. "What's all that?" he asked pointing toward the mirror and the turntable.

Shelley walked up the stairs with leaden feet. She tried not to listen to Robbie's monosyllabic answers to Frank's flow of questions and finally with the closing of the door, she no longer heard the words, but the echo of that deflated voice answering so low remained with her. She sat at the table twisting her rings staring at the wall clock until they came up.

"You'd better get ready for bed, Robbie?" she said, avoiding his eye. "It's ten."

"Let's see now," Frank was saying unaware of the silence of the boy, "I'll be off until Monday. Five days. I'll get the tube sprayed with black tomorrow and while it's drying I'll run up to the university and see if any of the professors know anything about assembling it and getting

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it finished. Ought to be able to get hold of a good eyepiece in town."

"Frank," Shelley said quietly after Robbie had gone to bed and they were finishing sandwiches and coffee, "why don't you let him finish it? He's worked so hard on it."

Frank looked up from the instructions he was poring over. "You bet he has. Great kid, isn't he! Who else has a kid who'd think of building his own telescope? Boy, I'm telling you, he's some kid!" Frank was district sales manager for the entire midwestern block of states. He was a large man, dark and quite handsome, although starting to put on excess weight.

Shelley looked at him thinking, he's stupid, but she denied it as quickly as the idea came. Not stupid, simple. He continued to be a salesman in his own home unmindful of the fact that his family hadn't been buying for years. He believed Robbie could do no wrong but that also he could do no right, without his, Frank's, help. She knew he saw himself as Robbie's only guide and idol and in turn the boy's most trivial utterances became gospel for him. She had hoped the passage of time and Robbie's constant growth of interests would by sheer massive being tend to wear down Frank's overpowering interference. But Frank was an intelligent man and for his son he was quite willing to broaden his own scope by studying and by seeking help from experts in order to stay in the game. He was intelligent, Shelley reminded herself. He could be made to understand and see what he was doing.

"Frank," she said, "Just try to see it from his viewpoint. He wants to do it by himself. If he needs help, he'll ask for it."

"What do you mean? You know we always do things like that together. That's what's wrong with most kids, they don't have a father who's interested enough to go to a little bit of trouble for them. But, I tell you, Robbie's going to amount to something one of these days, and I'll see to it that when he gets a bug on something, he'll know he isn't alone. No sir, he knows he can count on his old man up to the end."

He stayed up for hours after Shelley went to bed reading the books Robbie had collected on telescopes and astronomy. The next day he sent a special delivery order for an equatorial mount, precision clock drive and tripod, to be delivered airmail. He located a camera that could be clamped to the eyepiece and spent several hours with the photographer who taught him how to use it.

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"I know why he couldn't wait until I got home to get started on it," he explained to Shelley. "He wanted it ready in time for the eclipse of the moon next month. Boy, will I surprise him. I can't wait to see his face."

The telescope was completed and standing in the backyard two weeks later. Robbie had become withdrawn and subdued and refused to pose beside it for news photographers when they came to do a story about him and it. He didn't actually refuse, Shelley told herself; he just forgot to be home when they said they'd come. They settled for a picture of the telescope and an old snapshot of him. It was in the Sunday supplement. Frank ordered two dozen copies and mailed them to his business friends.

"Mom," Robbie said hesitantly the afternoon of the eclipse, if he falls asleep before time, do you think he'll wake up?"

Shelley shook her head not trusting her voice for a moment. Then she said firmly, "I know he won't. We'll be quiet."

Robbie ducked his head back to his book without speaking again, but she knew he wasn't reading it. If only she could hold *him* on her lap again, she thought, or even just hold him. She settled for an affectionate rubdown of his head and he grinned as if he understood.

Robbie went to bed early, before nine, with his clock set to awaken him at twelve-thirty. He had laid out his lined jeans and a woolen shirt and his boots were standing at the back door, for the ground was still covered with the last snowfall.

Shelley read for two hours, pretending to be too engrossed in her book to answer Frank when he spoke. Occasionally she glanced at him and by eleven-thirty she thought he was going to fall asleep after all, however, he got up briskly and announced that he was going to make coffee.

Shelley followed him to the kitchen. "Frank," she said quietly, "will you please go on to bed and let him do it alone."

Frank turned to face her and an ugly frown passed over his features to be lost again in his perpetual bland half smile. "Honey, you're the one who should go to bed. You don't care about getting out in that snow."

"I don't intend to get out in it more than a minute, unless Robbie wants me to. That's beside the point."

"O.K., Shelley, let's get it out in the open. Just what is the point? For weeks you've been needling me about getting out of Robbie's way, and from where I stand I can't see that I'm in his way." Frank sat down at the table and lighted a cigarette,

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squinting a bit when the smoke curled up around his eyes. "Well," he prompted when Shelley remained quiet.

"Frank, don't you honestly see what it is you do? Every time he gets absorbed in something you take it from him and finish it yourself. It isn't his if you do it for him, and he resents it."

Frank was slowly shaking his head before she finished speaking and methodically he stubbed out the cigarette. "Shelley, baby, that isn't it at all," he said oddly indulgent. "I've suspected it for a long time, and it's getting more and more obvious. You're jealous of me with the boy, aren't you? Don't you see there's no need for it. I love you more . . . This has nothing . . ."

"Frank!" she burst in angrily, "how dare you talk to me like that, as if I hadn't known about you and the others for years. I'm not concerned with what you do any longer. My only worry is for Robbie. I watched him with this telescope while you were gone. He's never been so excited about anything in his life. His eyes danced and he couldn't wait to get home and get to work on it; he'd run all the way from the bus stop and he brought home all his books and talked about it incessantly. Then you came home and took over. Is he excited now? Have you heard him say one word about it? He never even mentions it any more."

"So that's it!" Frank said and his voice was mean. "You just don't want me around at all. You want him all to yourself, don't you. I bet you had a good time trying to turn him against me while I was gone. By God, I should have seen it a long time ago." He jumped up from the chair and clutched at his hair as he did when angered. "Every time I come home he's a little more withdrawn. Oh, you've done a hell of a job on the kid. You must spend hours and hours brainwashing him to turn him against me. I can imagine the kind of stuff you must be filling his head with. But no more!" He was several feet from her as he spat out the words, and with each word he seemed to come closer and closer until his face was inches from her. "You hear me? No more. He's my kid and you can't split us up like that!"

Shelley stared unbelievingly at him and took a backward step and then another away from his large body crowding against her. "You know that isn't true," she whispered feeling suddenly very cold and afraid, "I don't want to come between you. I just want you to see what happens every time he gets interested in something . . ."

"Stay out of my way, Shelley." Frank met her eyes evenly and

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repeated, "Stay out of the way. You're not interested in what he does, but don't try to interfere with me. I know you can't stand me any more. By Heaven, you don't even try to pretend. That's O.K. by me. But just stay out of my way! I won't let you turn him into a mama's boy and I won't let you get between us. He's going to have things that are good, not some cheap junk that he scrounges around for. I can afford the best for him, and by God, he'll get it. If you don't like it, don't look—or get out."

He turned from her and savagely yanked a cup and saucer from the cabinet. Shelley left the kitchen fighting off nausea and faintness, afraid of the full-blown hatred she felt for him that must have lain within her, dormant, unrecognized for a long time. She crossed the dining room and as she entered the living room she thought she caught a flicker of movement in the hallway leading to Robbie's room. "Dear God," she breathed, "let him be asleep. Please . . ."

At two o'clock Shelley made hot chocolate for them. She pulled on her boots and fastened the hood of her car coat tight around her neck and carried the thick mugs, steaming in the fifteen degree temperature, out to the back of their yard where they were. She was walking carefully, feeling her way through the almost knee deep snow, and without realizing it she was as silent as the night itself. Overhead the moon had turned into a ghastly dark brick-red ball and all about it the stars had come out once more. It had been brilliant out in the gleaming snow earlier, but now deep shadows merged with the bushes and flowed down into the ground and the effect was weird and unpleasant. She paused to take a look at the moon away from the lights of the house and before she moved again, she caught Frank's voice, urgent, spilling out words.

"You will love it, Robbie. We'll go up to Palomar together and see how real astronomers study eclipses and things. And we'll go to Disneyland every Sunday until you yell uncle. You've never even seen the ocean. Wait till you see, just wait till you see. And there are mountains just an hour's drive away, and the desert. Everything in one state."

"No!" the word formed in her throat and some of the chocolate spilled and ran down her leg making her jerk and spill more. Matter of factly she told herself, "I'll kill him before I'll let him take Robbie away." She started walking again and called out, "Hey, fellows, hot chocolate! Any takers?"

They drank the chocolate, both silent and strained with her

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presence. Frank had been at the finder scope operating the camera and Robbie had field glasses trained on the moon when she joined them. He handed them over when he took the mug.

"It must be nearly over," Shelley said after one brief look. She didn't like the moon hidden and dark in the shadow.

"It isn't fully covered by the umbra yet," Robbie said. "That's still part of the penumbra. It'll get a lot darker. That's what the book says."

Frank chuckled. "And if the book says so, it's so, isn't it, pal?" He handed his mug back to Shelley. "We've been talking about some of the big observatories like Palomar, haven't we? We're going to see them all one of these days."

Shelley ignored the taunt, removed her glove and held her hand to Robbie's face for a moment. "Are you warm enough, honey? It's terribly cold out here." His face felt hotter than her hand.

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"I'm O.K., Mom. I won't wait until it comes out of the shadow, just until totality. O.K.? That's not long."

"O.K. I'll have more chocolate waiting." She left them, the boy with the field glasses pointed toward the unfamiliar red moon and the man bending over the finder, clicking the camera button now and then. Back in the house she stood in the bedroom looking out the window. Very faintly she could still see them in the same positions as if they were carved and only moved when she approached. Beyond them, slightly behind them, the woods rose darkly and off to the right of them Harrison's house lay dark and still in the morning hours. She'd put the hot water bottle in with Robbie when he went to bed, she thought. He must be cold. There was a movement at the telescope and she turned to see them both running for the house. She met them at the back door and was nearly swept along with them.

"My gun, where is it?" Frank shouted and pounded down the basement stairs.

Robbie was dialing the phone with stiff uncooperative fingers. Frank returned jamming shells into the shotgun. "Put down that telephone! I said you are not to call Lindstrom!" he yelled at the boy.

"But he'd know what to do!" Robbie cried and continued working with the dial.

Frank nearly knocked him down as he shoved him away from the wall phone. "I know what to do, too!" he said harshly and ran out the door calling over his shoulder. "Call the police and tell them."

Shelley felt as though she were in a swiftly moving dream where she couldn't make herself heard or understood as she tried to stop Frank and then tried to get Robbie to tell her what was wrong. Now she reached for and caught Robbie as he started to follow after Frank, but he only pushed the door shut after he looked out. "For heaven's sake, Robbie, what is it?" she cried.

His face was hot and feverish looking there was an odd fixed look in his eyes that didn't match the excitement he had shown only a moment before. Now he cocked his head as if listening, and slowly he appeared to become aware of Shelley shaking him. "He said he saw a spaceship or a flying saucer or something landing in the woods. He said now would be a perfect time for one, while everyone is either asleep or looking at the moon and they wouldn't be likely to notice something like that coming down. He said I should call the police and tell them. Do you think so?"

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"Robbie," Shelley cried helplessly, "what are you talking about? Frank didn't see anything in the woods. I was looking all the time and there wasn't anything. Not a light or a movement or anything."

"I know it," he said with a tight little smile. "I'd better not say what he said to say. I'll tell them that he saw something and thinks they should investigate." The fixed look had returned to his eyes and Shelley's hands dropped from his shoulders letting him go. She watched while an anxiety grew and became almost uncontrollable. What was happening? Robbie spoke quietly into the phone and then held it out to her. "They want my mother or someone."

Shelley listened to the cool voice and answered it, "Yes, he took his gun and headed for the woods. I don't know what he saw." She told them where and hung up. Robbie was walking away from her toward the bedroom and she caught him and spun him around. "Tell me what happened out there, Robbie."

He patted her hand on his shoulder and said, "Let's see if we can see anything from the window." His boots trailed melting snow as he walked, and again she felt a fear forcing her not to speak again yet. He walked stiffly as if unaware of what he was doing, as if his mind were far away.

At the window they stood side by side and strained to see what was happening. Nothing moved outside and it was darker than it had been. What had he called it? The umbra must be passing over the face of the moon. In the sullen red light that wasn't light at all they could see nothing. Suddenly Robbie spoke and his voice sounded very remote, as distant and cold as the red moon itself. "There was a round ship with glowing circular portholes all around it. It came down without any noise and landed behind the stand of pines. I said I'd get hold of Mr. Lindstrom and Dad began yelling that he'd go and see what it was and for me not to call in that flea brain. He thought he might need the gun." He stopped and his hand clenched hard on hers, squeezing tightly.

"Robbie! What is it? What's wrong?" Shelley cried and abruptly the pressure eased and then she could hear the sound of guns and faintly, dimly, a scream of pain and fear. Without a sound Robbie fell to the floor at her side.

When the police came Shelley was rubbing his feet and hands alternately. She had wrestled him out of the heavy outer clothing and had managed to get him into his bed, but still he lay inert and limp, deeply unconscious.

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"I'm sorry, ma'm, but we had to do it," the uniformed man said in a strained, shocked voice. "Your husband was yelling and shooting. I'm sorry, but he would have killed us both." Shelley could only stare in horror and he stood twisting his hat looking everywhere but directly at her. Before the silence became unbreakable he replaced his hat and reached for the door. "You stay here with the boy, ma'm. They'll send an ambulance and a doctor and I'll tell him to come over directly. We won't need him out there."

Shelley mumbled something and went back to Robbie. She sat on the side of his bed and rubbed his hands watching his chest rise and fall as he slept the deep sleep of the completely exhausted. Her eyes passed from his flushed face to the signs that covered one wall, signs and pictures. There it was, the circular saucer with the round portholes. It was the cover of a magazine he had saved. And below it the crazy sign that said, 'Plan Ahead' and ran out of space for all the letters. And the one that said, 'There Is No Problem The Mind Can't Solve.'

She could picture vividly what had happened. What must have happened. It would take only a suggestion from Robbie and Frank would have to believe a ship had landed. And by mentioning Lindstrom's name Frank's decision to investigate had been assured. Thinking spacemen were there, probably terrified, he had shot at the first thing that moved, the county police.

Why had Robbie fainted before the shots? How could he have been so sure the shots would occur? She shuddered as her restless gaze roamed the room again and stopped on the sign that said, 'Genius At Work.'

THE END

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The men who did dangerous work had a special kind of insurance policy. But when somebody wanted to collect on that policy, the claims investigator suddenly became a member of . . .

The RISK PROFESSION

By DONALD E. WESTLAKE

MISTER HENDERSON called me into his office my third day back in Tangiers. That was a day and a half later than I'd expected. Roving claims investigators for Tangiers Mutual Insurance Corporation don't usually get to spend more than thirty-six consecutive hours at home base.

Henderson was jovial but stern. That meant he was happy with the job I'd just completed, and that he was pretty sure I'd find some crooked shenanigans on this next assignment. That

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didn't please me. I'm basically a plain-living type, and I hate complications. I almost wished for a second there that I was back on Fire and Theft in Greater New York. But I knew better than that. As a roving claim investigator, I avoided the more stultifying paper work inherent in this line of work and had the additional luxury of an expense account nobody ever questioned.

It made working for a living almost worthwhile.

When I was settled in the chair beside his desk, Henderson said, "That was good work you did on Luna, Ged. Saved the company a pretty pence."

I smiled modestly and said, "Thank you, sir." And reflected to myself for the thousandth time that the company could do worse than split that saving with the guy who'd made it possible. Me, in other words.

"Got a tricky one this time, Ged," said my boss. He had done his back-patting, now we got down to business. He peered keenly at me, or at least as keenly as a round-faced tiny-eyed fat man *can* peer. "What do you know about the Risk Profession Retirement Plan?" he asked me.

"I've heard of it," I said truthfully. "That's about all."

He nodded. "Most of the policies are sold off-planet, of course. It's a form of insurance for non-insurables. Spaceship crews, asteroid prospectors, people like that."

"I see," I said, unhappily. I knew right away this meant I was going to have to go off-Earth again. I'm a one-gee boy all the way. Gravity changes get me in the solar plexus. I get g-sick at the drop of an elevator.

"Here's the way it works," he went on, either not noticing my sad face or choosing to ignore it. "The client pays a monthly premium. He can be as far ahead or as far behind in his payments as he wants—the policy has no lapse clause—just so he's all paid up by the Target Date. The Target Date is a retirement age, forty-five or above, chosen by the client himself. After the Target Date, he stops paying premiums, and we begin to pay him a monthly retirement check, the amount determined by the amount paid into the policy, his age at retiring, and so on. Clear?"

I nodded, looking for the gimmick that made this a paying proposition for good old Tangiers Mutual.

"The Double R-P—that's what we call it around the office here—assures the client that he won't be reduced to panhandling in his old age, should his other retirement plans fall through. For Belt prospectors, of course, this means the big strike, which

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maybe one in a hundred find. For the man who never does make that big strike, this is something to fall back on. He can come home to Earth and retire, with a guaranteed income for the rest of his life."

I nodded again, like a good company man.

"Of course," said Henderson, emphasizing this point with an upraised chubby finger, "these men are still uninsurables. This is a retirement plan only, not an insurance policy. There is no beneficiary other than the client himself."

And there was the gimmick. I knew a little something of the actuarial statistics concerning uninsurables, particularly Belt prospectors. Not many of them lived to be forty-five, and the few who would survive the Belt and come home to collect the retirement wouldn't last more than a year or two. A man who's spent the last twenty or thirty years on low-gee asteroids just shrivels up after a while when he tries to live on Earth.

It needed a company like Tangiers Mutual to dream up a racket like that. The term 'uninsurables' to most insurance companies means those people whose jobs or habitats make them too likely as prospects for obituaries. To Tangiers Mutual, uninsurables are people who have money the company can't get at.

"Now," said Henderson importantly, "we come to the problem at hand." He ruffled his up-to-now-neat In basket and finally found the folder he wanted. He studied the blank exterior of this folder for a few seconds, pursing his lips at it, and said, "One of our clients under the Double R-P was a man named Jafe McCann."

"Was?" I echoed.

He squinted at me, then nodded at my sharpness. "That's right, he's dead." He sighed heavily and tapped the folder with all those pudgy fingers. "Normally," he said, "that would be the end of it. File closed. However, this time there are complications."

Naturally. Otherwise, he wouldn't be telling *me* about it. But Henderson couldn't be rushed, and I knew it. I kept the alert look on my face and thought of other things, while waiting for him to get to the point.

"Two weeks after Jafe McCann's death," Henderson said, "we received a cash-return form on his policy."

"A cash-return form?" I'd never heard of such a thing. It didn't sound like anything Tangiers Mutual would have anything to do with. We *never* return cash.

"It's something special in this

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case," he explained. "You see, this isn't an insurance policy, it's a retirement plan, and the client can withdraw from the retirement plan at any time, and have seventy-five per cent of his paid-up premiums returned to him. It's, uh, the law in plans such as this."

"Oh," I said. That explained it. A law that had snuck through the World Finance Code Commission while the insurance lobby wasn't looking.

"But you see the point," said Henderson. "This cash-return form arrived two weeks after the client's death."

"You said there weren't any beneficiaries," I pointed out.

"Of course. But the form was sent in by the man's partner, one Ab Karpin. McCann left a hand-written will bequeathing all his possessions to Karpin. Since, according to Karpin, this was done before McCann's death, the premium money cannot be considered part of the policy, but as part of McCann's cash-on-hand. And Karpin wants it."

"It can't be that much, can it?" I asked. I was trying my best to point out to him that the company would spend more than it would save if it sent me all the way out to the asteroids, a prospect I could feel coming and one which I wasn't ready to cry hosannah over.

"McCann died," Henderson said ponderously, "at the age of fifty-six. He had set his retirement age at sixty. He took out the policy at the age of thirty-four, with monthly payments of fifty credits. Figure it out for yourself."

I did—in my head—and came up with a figure of thirteen thousand and two hundred credits. Seventy-five per cent of that would be nine thousand and nine hundred credits. Call it ten thousand credits even.

I had to admit it. It was worth the trip.

"I see," I said sadly.

"Now," said Henderson, "the conditions—the circumstances—of McCann's death are somewhat suspicious. And so is the cash-return form itself."

"There's a chance it's a forgery?"

"One would think so," he said. "But our handwriting experts have worn themselves out with that form, comparing it with every other single scrap of McCann's writing they can find. And their conclusion is that not only is it genuinely McCann's handwriting, but it is McCann's handwriting at age fifty-six."

"So McCann must have written it," I said. "Under duress, do you think?"

"I have no idea," said Henderson complacently. "That's what you're supposed to find out. Oh,

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there's just one more thing."

I did my best to make my ears perk.

"I told you that McCann's death occurred under somewhat suspicious circumstances."

"Yes," I agreed, "you did."

"McCann and Karpin," he said, "have been partners—unincorporated, of course—for the last fifteen years. They had found small rare-metal deposits now and again, but they had never found that one big strike all the Belt prospectors waste their lives looking for. Not until the day before McCann died."

"Ah hah," I said. "*Then* they found the big strike."

"Exactly."

"And McCann's death?"

"Accidental."

"Sure," I said. "What proof have we got?"

"None. The body is lost in space. And law is few and far between that far out."

"So all we've got is this guy Karpin's word for how McCann died, is that it?"

"That's all we have. So far."

"Sure. And now you want me to go on out there and find out what's cooking, and see if I can maybe save the company ten thousand credits."

"Exactly," said Henderson.

THE COPTER took me to the spaceport west of Cairo, and there I boarded the good ship *Demeter* for Luna City and points Out. I loaded up on g-sickness pills and they worked fine. I was sick as a dog.

By the time we got to Atronics City, my insides had grown resigned to their fate. As long as I didn't try to eat, my stomach would leave me alone.

Atronics City was about as depressing as a Turkish bath with all the lights on. It stood on a chunk of rock a couple of miles thick, and it looked like nothing more in this world than a welder's practice range.

From the outside, Atronics City is just a derby-shaped dome of nickel-iron, black and kind of dirty looking. I suppose a transparent dome would have been more fun, but the builders of the company cities in the asteroids were businessmen, and they weren't concerned with having fun. There's nothing to look at outside the dome but chunks of rock and the blackness of space anyway, and you've got all this cheap iron floating around in the vicinity, and all a dome's supposed to do is keep the air in. Besides, though the belt isn't as crowded as a lot of people think, there *is* quite a lot of debris rushing here and there, bumping into things, and a transparent dome would just get all scratched up, not to mention punctured.

From the inside, Atronics

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City is even jollier. There's the top level, directly under the dome, which is mainly parking area for scooters and tuggers of various kinds, plus the office shacks of the Assayer's Office, the Entry Authority, the Industry Troopers and so on. The next three levels have all been burned into the bowels of the planetoid.

Level two is the Atronics plant, and a noisy plant it is. Level three is the shopping and entertainment area—grocery stores and clothing stores and movie theaters and bars—and level four is housing, two rooms and kitchen for the unmarried, four rooms and kitchen plus one room for each child for the married.

All of these levels have one thing in common. Square corners, painted olive drab. The total effect of the place is suffocating. You feel like you're stuck in the middle of a stack of packing crates.

Most of the people living in Atronics City work, of course, for International Atronics, Incorporated. The rest of them work in the service occupations—running the bars and grocery stores and so on—that keep the company employees alive and relatively happy.

Wages come high in the places like Atronics City. Why not, the raw materials come practically for free. And as for working conditions, well, take a for instance. How do you make a vacuum tube? You fiddle with the innards and surround it all with glass. And how do you get the air out? No problem, boy, there wasn't any air in there to begin with.

At any rate, there I was at Atronics City. That was as far as *Demeter* would take me. Now, while the ship went on to Ludlum City and Chemisant City and the other asteroid business towns, my two suitcases and I dribbled down the elevator to my hostelry on level four.

Have you ever taken an elevator ride when the gravity is practically non-existent? Well, don't. You see, the elevator manages to sink faster than you do. It isn't being *lowered* down to level four, it's being *pulled* down.

What this means is that the suitcases have to be lashed down with the straps provided, and you and the operator have to hold on tight to the hand-grips placed here and there around the wall. Otherwise, you'd clonk your head on the ceiling.

But we got to level four at last, and off I went with my suitcases and the operator's directions. The suitcases weighed about half an ounce each out here, and I felt as though I weighed the same. Every time I raised a foot, I was sure I was

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about to go sailing into a wall. Local citizens eased by me, their feet occasionally touching the iron pavement as they soared along, and I gave them all dirty looks.

Level four was nothing but walls and windows. The iron floor went among these walls and windows in a straight straight line, bisecting other "streets" at perfect right angles, and the iron ceiling sixteen feet up was lined with a double row of fluorescent tubes. I was beginning to feel claustrophobic already.

The Chalmers Hotel—named for an Atronics vice-president—had received my advance registration, which was nice. I was shown to a second-floor room—nothing on level four had more than two stories—and was left to unpack my suitcases as best I may.

I had decided to spend a day or two at Atronics City before taking a scooter out to Ab Karpin's claim. Atronics City had been Karpin's and McCann's home base. All of McCann's premium payments had been mailed from here, and the normal mailing address for both of them was GPO Atronics City.

I wanted to know as much as possible about Ab Karpin before I went out to see him. And Atronics City seemed like the best place to get my information.

But not today. Today, my stomach was very unhappy, and my head was on sympathy strike. Today, I was going to spend my time exclusively in bed, trying not to float up to the ceiling.

THE Mapping & Registry Office, it seemed to me the next day, was the best place to start. This was where prospectors filed their claims, but it was a lot more than that. The waiting room of M&R was the unofficial club of the asteroid prospectors. This is where they met with one another, talked together about the things that prospectors discuss, and made and dissolved their transient partnerships.

In this way, Karpin and McCann were unusual. They had maintained their partnership for fifteen years. That was about sixty times longer than most such arrangements lasted.

Searching the asteroid chunks for rare and valuable metals is basically pretty lonely work, and it's inevitable that the prospectors will every once in a while get hungry for human company and decide to try a team operation. But, at the same time, work like this attracts people who don't get along very well with human company. So the partnerships come and go, and the hatreds flare and are forgotten, and

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the normal prospecting team lasts an average of three months.

At any rate, it was to the Mapping & Registry Office that I went first. And, since that office was up on the first level, I went by elevator.

Riding *up* in that elevator was a heck of a lot more fun than riding down. The elevator whipped up like mad, the floor pressed against the soles of my feet, and it felt almost like good old Earth for a second or two there. But then the elevator stopped, and I held on tight to the hand-grips to keep from shooting through the top of the blasted thing.

The operator—a phlegmatic sort—gave me directions to the M&R, and off I went, still trying to figure out how to sail along as gracefully as the locals.

The Mapping & Registry Office occupied a good-sized shack over near the dome wall, next to the entry lock. I pushed open the door and went on in.

The waiting room was cozy and surprisingly large, large enough to comfortably hold the six maroon leather sofas scattered here and there on the pale green carpet, flanked by bronze ashtray stands. There were only six prospectors here at the moment, chatting together in two groups of three, and they all looked alike. Grizzled, ageless, watery-eyed, their clothing clean but baggy. I passed them and went on to the desk at the far end, behind which sat a young man in official gray, slowly turning the crank of a microfilm reader.

He looked up at my approach. I flashed my company identification and asked to speak to the manager. He went away, came back, and ushered me into an office which managed to be Spartan and sumptuous at the same time. The walls had been plastic-painted in textured brown, the iron floor had been lushly carpeted in gray, and the desk had been covered with a simulated wood coating.

The manager—a man named Teaking—went well with the office. His face and hands were spare and lean, but his uniform was immaculate, covered with every curlicue the regulations allowed. He welcomed me politely, but curiously, and I said, "I wonder if you know a prospector named Ab Karpin?"

"Karpin? Of course. He and old Jafe McCann—pity about McCann. I hear he got killed."

"Yes, he did."

"And that's what you're here for, eh?" He nodded sagely. "I didn't know the Belt boys could get insurance," he said.

"It isn't exactly that," I said. "This concerns a retirement plan, and—well, the details don't

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matter." Which, I hoped, would end his curiosity in that line. "I was hoping you could give me some background on Karpin. And on McCann, too, for that matter."

He grinned a bit. "You saw the men sitting outside?"

I nodded.

"Then you've seen Karpin and McCann. Exactly the same. It doesn't matter if a man's thirty or sixty or what. It doesn't matter what he was like before he came out here. If he's been here a few years, he looks exactly like the bunch you saw outside there."

"That's appearance," I said. "What I was looking for was personality."

"Same thing," he said. "All of them. Close-mouthed, anti-social, fiercely independent, incurably romantic, always convinced that the big strike is just a piece of rock away. McCann, now, he was a bit more realistic than most. He'd be the one I'd expect to take out a retirement policy. A real pence-pincher, that one, though I shouldn't say it as he's dead. But that's the way he was. Brighter than most Belt boys when it came to money matters. I've seen him haggle over a new piece of equipment for their scooter, or some repair work, or some such thing, and he was a wonder to watch."

"And Karpin?" I asked him.

"A prospector," he said, as though that answered my question. "Same as everybody else. Not as sharp as McCann when it came to money. That's why all the money stuff in the partnership was handled by McCann. But Karpin was one of the sharpest boys in the business when it came to mineralogy. He knew rocks you and I never heard of, and most times he knew them by sight. Almost all of the Belt boys are college grads—you've got to know what you're looking for out here and what it looks like when you've found it—but Karpin has practically all of them beat. He's *sharp*."

"Sounds like a good team," I said.

"I guess that's why they stayed together so long," he said. "They complemented each other." He leaned forward, the inevitable prelude to a confidential remark. "I'll tell you something off the record, Mister," he said. "Those two were smarter than they knew. Their partnership was never legalized, it was never anything more than a piece of paper. And there's a bunch of fellas around here mighty unhappy about that today. Jafe McCann is the one who handled all the money matters, like I said. He's got IOU's all over town."

"And they can't collect from Karpin?"

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He nodded. "Jeff McCann died just a bit too soon. He was sharp and cheap, but he was honest. If he'd lived, he would have repaid all his debts, I'm sure of it. And if this strike they made is as good as I hear, he would have been able to repay them with no trouble at all."

I nodded, somewhat impatiently. I had the feeling by now that I was talking to a man who was one of those who had a Jeff McCann IOU in his pocket. "How long has it been since you've seen Karpin?" I asked him, wondering what Karpin's attitude and expression was now that his partner was dead.

"Oh, Lord, not for a couple of months," he said. "Not since they went out together the last time and made that strike."

"Didn't Karpin come in to make his claim?"

"Not here. Over to Chemisant City. That was the nearest M&R to the strike."

"Oh." That was a pity. I would have liked to have known if there had been a change of any kind in Karpin since his partner's death. "I'll tell you what the situation is," I said, with a false air of truthfulness. "We have some misgivings about McCann's death. Not suspicions, exactly, just misgivings. The timing is what bothers us."

"You mean, because it happened just after the strike?"

"That's it," I answered frankly.

He shook his head. "I wouldn't get too excited about that, if I were you," he said. "It wouldn't be the first time it's happened. A man makes the big strike after all, and he gets so excited he forgets himself for a minute and gets careless. And you only have to be careless once out here."

"That may be it," I said. I got to my feet, knowing I'd picked up all there was from this man. "Thanks a lot for your cooperation," I said.

"Any time," he said. He stood and shook hands with me.

I went back out through the chatting prospectors and crossed the echoing cavern that was level one, aiming to rent myself a scooter.

I DON'T like rockets. They're noisy as the dickens, they steer hard and drive erratically, and you can never carry what *I* would consider a safe emergency excess of fuel. Nothing like the big steady-g interplanetary liners. On those I feel almost human.

The appearance of the scooter I was shown at the rental agency didn't do much to raise my opinion of this mode of transportation. The thing was a good ten years old, the paint scraped and scratched all over its egg-shaped, originally green-colored body, and the windshield—a silly term, really, for the front window of a

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craft that spends most of its time out where there isn't any wind—was scratched and pockmarked to the point of translucency by years of exposure to the asteroidal dust.

The rental agent was a sharp-nosed thin-faced type who displayed this refugee from a melting vat without a blush, and still didn't blush when he told me the charges. Twenty credits a day, plus fuel.

I paid without a murmur—it was the company's money, not mine—and paid an additional ten credits for the rental of a suit to go with it. I worked my way awkwardly into the suit, and clambered into the driver's seat of the relic. I attached the suit to the ship in all the necessary places, and the agent closed and spun the door.

Most of the black paint had worn off the handles of the controls, and insulation peeked through rips in the plastic siding here and there. I wondered if the thing had any slow leaks and supposed fatalistically that it had. The agent waved at me, stony-faced, the conveyor belt trundled me outside the dome, and I kicked the weary rocket into life.

The scooter had a tendency to roll to the right. If I hadn't kept fighting it back, it would have soon worked up a dandy little spin. I was spending so much time juggling with the controls that I practically missed a couple of my beacon rocks, and that would have been just too bad. If I'd gotten off the course I had carefully outlined for myself, I'd never have found my bearings again, and I would have just floated around amid the scenery until some passerby took pity and towed me back home.

But I managed to avoid getting lost, which surprised me, and after four nerve-wracking hours I finally spotted the yellow-painted X of a registered claim on a half-mile thick chunk of rock dead ahead. As I got closer, I spied a scooter parked near the X, and beside it an inflated portable dome. The scooter was somewhat larger than mine, but no newer and probably even less safe. The dome was vari-colored, from repeated patching.

This would be the claim, and this is where I would find Karpin, sitting on his property while waiting for the sale to go through. Prospectors like Karpin are free-lance men, working for no particular company. They register their claims in their own names, and then sell the rights to whichever company shows up first with the most attractive offer. There's a lot of paperwork to such a sale, and it's all handled by the company. While waiting, the smart prospector sits on his claim and makes sure nobody

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chips off a part of it for himself, a stunt that still happens now and again. It doesn't take too much concentrated explosive to make two rocks out of one rock, and a man's claim is only the rock with his X on it.

I set the scooter down next to the other one, and flicked the toggle for the air pumps, then put on the fishbowl and went about unattaching the suit from the ship. When the red light flashed on and off, I spun the door, opened it, and stepped out onto the rock, moving very cautiously. It isn't that I don't believe the magnets in the bootsoles will work, it's just that I know for a fact that they won't work if I happen to raise both feet at the same time.

I clumped across the crude X to Karpin's dome. The dome had no viewports at all, so I wasn't sure Karpin was aware of my presence. I rapped my metal glove on the metal outer door of the lock, and then I was sure.

But it took him long enough to open up. I had just about decided he'd joined his partner in the long sleep when the door cracked open an inch. I pushed it open and stepped into the lock, ducking my head. The door was only five feet high, and just as wide as the lock itself, three feet. The other dimensions of the lock were: height, six feet six; width, one foot. Not exactly room to dance in.

When the red light high on the left-hand wall clicked off, I rapped on the inner door. It promptly opened, I stepped through and removed the fishbowl.

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Karpin stood in the middle of the room, a small revolver in his hand. "Shut the door," he said.

I obeyed, moving slowly. I didn't want that gun to go off by mistake.

"Who are you?" Karpin demanded. The M&R man had been right. Ab Karpin was a dead ringer for all those other prospectors I'd seen back at Atronics City. Short and skinny and grizzled and ageless. He could have been forty, and he could have been ninety, but he was probably somewhere the other side of fifty. His hair was black and limp and thinning, ruffled in little wisps across his wrinkled pate. His forehead and cheeks were lined like a plowed field, and were much the same color. His eyes were wide apart and small, so deepset beneath shaggy brows that they seemed black. His mouth was thin, almost lipless. The hand holding the revolver was nothing but bones and blue veins covered with taut skin.

He was wearing a dirty undershirt and an old pair of trousers that had been cut off raggedly just above his knobby knees. Faded slippers were on his feet. He had good reason for dressing that way, the temperature inside the dome must have been nearly ninety degrees. The dome wasn't reflecting away the sun's heat as well as it had when it was young.

I looked at Karpin, and despite the revolver and the tense expression on his face, he was the least dangerous-looking man I'd ever run across. All at once, the idea that this anti-social old geezer had the drive or the imagination to murder his partner seemed ridiculous.

Apparently, I spent too much time looking him over, because he said again, "Who are you?" And this time he motioned impatiently with the revolver.

"Stanton," I told him. "Ged Stanton, Tangiers Mutual Insurance. I have identification, but it's in my pants pocket, down inside this suit."

"Get it," he said. "And move slow."

"Right you are."

I moved slow, as per directions, and peeled out of the suit, then reached into my trouser pocket and took out my ID clip. I flipped it open and showed him the card bearing my signature and picture and right thumbprint and the name of the company I represented, and he nodded, satisfied, and tossed the revolver over onto his bed. "I got to be careful," he said. "I got a big claim here."

"I know that," I told him. "Congratulations for it."

"Thanks," he said, but he still looked peevish. "You're here about Jafe's insurance, right?"

"That I am."

"Don't want to pay up, I sup-

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pose. That doesn't surprise me."

Blunt old men irritate me. "Well," I said, "we do have to investigate."

"Sure," he said. "You want some coffee?"

"Thank you."

"You can sit in that chair there. That was Jafe's."

I settled gingerly in the cloth-and-plastic foldaway chair he'd pointed at, and he went over to the kitchen area of the dome to start coffee. I took the opportunity to look the dome over. It was the first portable dome I'd ever been inside.

It was all one room, roughly circular, with a diameter of about fifteen feet. The sides went straight up for the first seven feet, then curved gradually inward to form the roof. At the center of the dome, the ceiling was about twelve feet high.

The floor of the room was simply the asteroidal rock surface, not completely level and smooth. There were two chairs and a table to the right of the entry lock, two foldaway cots around the wall beyond them, the kitchen area next and a cluttered storage area around on the other side. There was a heater standing alone in the center of the room, but it certainly wasn't needed now. Sweat was already trickling down the back of my neck and down my forehead into my eyebrows. I peeled off my shirt and used it to wipe sweat from my face. "Warm in here," I said.

"You get used to it," he muttered, which I found hard to believe.

He brought over the coffee, and I tasted it. It was rotten, as bitter as this old hermit's soul, but I said, "Good coffee. Thanks a lot."

"I like it strong," he said.

I looked around at the room again. "All the comforts of home, eh? Pretty ingenious arrangement."

"Sure," he said sourly. "How about getting to the point, Mister?"

There's only one way to handle a blunt old man. Be blunt right back. "I'll tell you how it is," I said. "The company isn't accusing you of anything, but it has to be sure everything's on the up and up before it pays out any ten thousand credits. And your partner just happening to fill out that cash-return form just before he died—well, you've got to admit it is a funny kind of coincidence."

"How so?" He slurped coffee, and glowered at me over the cup. "We made this strike here," he said. "We knew it was the big one. Jafe had that insurance policy of his in case he never did make the big strike. As soon as we knew this was the big one, he said, 'I guess I don't need

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that retirement now,' and sat right down and wrote out the cash-return. Then we opened a bottle of liquor and celebrated, and he got himself killed."

The way Karpin said it, it sounded smooth and natural. *Too* smooth and natural. "How did this accident happen anyway?" I asked him.

"I'm not one hundred per cent sure of that myself," he said. "I was pretty well drunk myself by that time. But he put on his suit and said he was going out to paint the X. He was falling all over himself, and I tried to tell him it could wait till we'd had some sleep, but he wouldn't pay any attention to me."

"So he went out," I said.

He nodded. "He went out first. After a couple minutes, I got lonesome in here, so I suited up and went out after him. It happened just as I was going out the lock, and I just barely got a glimpse of what happened."

He attacked the coffee again, noisily, and I prompted him, saying, "What did happen, Mister Karpin?"

"Well, he was capering around out there, waving the paint tube and such. There's a lot of sharp rock sticking out around here. just as I got outside, he lost his balance and kicked out, and scraped right into some of that rock, and punctured his suit."

"I thought the body was lost," I said.

He nodded. "It was. The last thing in life Jafe ever did was try to shove himself away from those rocks. That, and the force of air coming out of that puncture for the first second or two, was enough to throw him up off the surface. It threw him up too high, and he never got back down."

My doubt must have showed in my face, because he added, "Mister, there isn't enough gravity on this place to shoot craps with."

He was right. As we talked, I kept finding myself holding unnecessarily tight to the arms of the chair. I kept having the feeling I was going to float out of the chair and hover around up at the top of the dome if I were to let go. It was silly of course—there was *some* gravity on that planetoid, after all—but I just don't seem to get used to low-gee.

Nevertheless, I still had some more questions. "Didn't you try to get his body back? Couldn't you have reached him?"

"I tried to, Mister," he said. "Old Jafe McCann was my partner for fifteen years. But I was drunk, and that's a fact. And I was afraid to go jumping up in the air, for fear *I'd* go floating away, too."

"Frankly," I said, "I'm no expert on low gravity and aster-

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oids. But wouldn't McCann's body just go into orbit around this rock? I mean, it wouldn't simply go floating off into space, would it?"

"It sure would," he said. "There's a lot of other rocks out here, too, Mister, and a lot of them are bigger than this one and have a lot more gravity pull. I don't suppose there's a navigator in the business who could have computed Jafe's course in advance. He floated up, and then he floated back over the dome here and seemed to hover for a couple minutes, and then he just floated out and away. His isn't the only body circling around the sun with all these rocks, you know."

I chewed a lip and thought it all over. I didn't know enough about asteroid gravity or the conditions out here to be able to say for sure whether Karpin's story was true or not. Up to this point, I couldn't attack the problem on a fact basis. I had to depend on *feeling* now, the hunches and instincts of eight years in this job, hearing some people tell lies and other people tell the truth.

And my instinct said Ab Karpin was lying in his teeth. That dramatic little touch about McCann's body hovering over the dome before disappearing into the void, that sounded more like the embellishment of fiction than the circumstance of truth. And the string of coincidences were just too much. McCann just coincidentally happens to die right after he and his partner make their big strike. He happens to write out the cash-return form just before dying. And his body just happens to float away, so nobody can look at it and check Karpin's story.

But no matter what my instinct said, the story was smooth. It was smooth as glass, and there was no place for me to get a grip on it.

What now? There wasn't any hole in Karpin's story, at least none that I could see. I had to break his story somehow, and in order to do that I had to do some nosing around on this planetoid. I couldn't know in advance what I was looking for, I could only look. I'd know it when I found it. It would be something that conflicted with Karpin's story.

And for that, I had to be sure the story was complete. "You said McCann had gone out to paint the X," I said. "Did he paint it?"

Karpin shook his head. "He never got a chance. He spent all his time dancing, up till he went and killed himself."

"So you painted it yourself."

He nodded.

"And then you went on into Atronics City and registered

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your claim, is that the story?"

"No. Chemisant City was closer than Atronics City right then, so I went there. Just after Jafe's death, and everything—I didn't feel like being alone any more than I had to."

"You said Chemisant City was closer to you *then*," I said. "Isn't it now?"

"Things move around a lot out here, Mister," he said. "Right now, Chemisant City's almost twice as far from here as Atronics City. In about three days, it'll start swinging in closer again. Things keep shifting around out here."

"So I've noticed," I said. "When you took off to go to Chemisant City, didn't you make a try for your partner's body then?"

He shook his head. "He was long out of sight by then," he said. "That was ten, eleven hours later, when I took off."

"Why's that? All you had to do was paint the X and take off."

"Mister, I told you. I was drunk. I was falling down drunk, and when I saw I couldn't get at Jafe, and he was dead anyway, I came back in here and slept it off. Maybe if I'd been sober I would have taken the scooter and gone after him, but I was *drunk*."

"I see." And there just weren't any more questions I could think of to ask, not right now. So I said, "I've just had a shaky four-hour ride coming out here. Mind if I stick around a while before going back?"

"Help yourself," he said, in a pretty poor attempt at genial hospitality. "You can sleep over, if you want."

"Fine," I said. "I think I'd like that."

"You wouldn't happen to play cribbage, would you?" he asked, with the first real sign of animation I'd seen in him yet.

"I learn fast," I told him.

"Okay," he said. "I'll teach you." And he produced a filthy deck of cards and taught me.

AFTER losing nine straight games of cribbage, I quit, and got to my feet. I was at my most casual as I stretched and said, "Okay if I wander around outside for a while? I've never been on an asteroid like this before. I mean, a little one like this. I've just been to the company cities up to now."

"Go right ahead," he said. "I've got some polishing and patching to do, anyway." He made his voice sound easy and innocent, but I noticed his eyes were alert and wary, watching me as I struggled back into my suit.

I didn't bother to put my shirt back on first, and that was a mistake. The temperature inside an atmosphere suit is a steady sixty-eight degrees. That had never

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seemed particularly chilly before, but after the heat of that dome, it seemed cold as a blizzard inside the suit.

I went on out through the airlock, and moved as briskly as possible in the cumbersome suit, while the sweat chilled on my back and face, and I accepted the glum conviction that one thing I was going to get out of this trip for sure was a nasty head cold.

I went over to the X first, and stood looking at it. It was just an X, that's all, shakily scrawled in yellow paint, with the initials "J-A" scrawled much smaller beside it.

I left the X and clumped away. The horizon was practically at arm's length, so it didn't take long for the dome to be out of sight. And then I clumped more slowly, studying the surface of the asteroid.

What I was looking for was a grave. I believed that Karpin was lying, that he had murdered his partner. And I didn't believe that Jafe McCann's body had floated off into space. I was convinced that his body was still somewhere on this asteroid. Karpin had been forced to concoct a story about the body being lost because the appearance of the body would prove somehow that it had been murder and not accident. I was convinced of that, and now all I had to do was prove it.

But that asteroid was a pretty unlikely place for a grave. That wasn't dirt I was walking on, it was rock, solid metallic rock. You don't dig a grave in solid rock, not with a shovel. You maybe can do it with dynamite, but that won't work too well if your object is to keep anybody from seeing that the hole has been made. Dirt can be patted down. Blown-up rock looks like blown-up rock, and that's all there is to it.

I considered crevices and fissures in the surface, some cranny large enough for Karpin to have stuffed the body into. But I didn't find any of these either as I plodded along, being sure to keep one magnetted boot always in contact with the ground.

Karpin and McCann had set their dome up at just about the only really level spot on that entire planetoid. The rest of it was nothing but jagged rock, and it wasn't easy traveling at all, maneuvering around with magnets on my boots and a bulky atmosphere suit cramping my movements.

And then I stopped and looked out at space and cursed myself for a ring-tailed baboon. McCann's body might be anywhere in the Solar System, anywhere at all, but there was one place I could be sure it wasn't, and that place was this asteroid. No, Karpin had not blown a

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grave or stuffed the body into a fissure in the ground. Why not? Because this chunk of rock was valuable, that's why not. Because Karpin was in the process of selling it to one of the major companies, and that company would come along and chop this chunk of rock to pieces, getting the valuable metal out, and McCann's body would turn up in the first week of operations if Karpin were stupid enough to bury it here.

Ten hours between McCann's death and Karpin's departure for Chemisant City. He'd admitted that already. And I was willing to bet he'd spent at least part of that time carrying McCann's body to some other asteroid, one he was sure was nothing but worthless rock. If that were true, it meant the mortal remains of Jafe McCann were now somewhere—*anywhere*—in the Asteroid Belt. Even if I assumed that the body had been hidden on an asteroid somewhere between here and Chemisant City—which wasn't necessarily so—that wouldn't help at all. The relative positions of planetoids in the Belt just keep on shifting. A small chunk of rock that was between here and Chemisant City a few weeks ago—it could be almost anywhere in the Belt right now.

The body, that was the main item. I'd more or less counted on finding it somehow. At the moment, I couldn't think of any other angle for attacking Karpin's story.

As I clopped morosely back to the dome, I nibbled at Karpin's story in my mind. For instance, why go to Chemisant City? It was closer, he said, but it couldn't have been closer by more than a couple of hours. The way I understood it, Karpin was well-known back on Atronics City—it was the normal base of operations for he and his partner—and he didn't know a soul at Chemisant City. Did it make sense for him to go somewhere he wasn't known after his partner's death, even if it *was* an hour closer? No, it made a lot more sense for a man in that situation to go where he's known, go someplace where he has friends who'll sympathize with him and help him over the shock of losing a partner of fifteen years' standing, even if going there does mean traveling an hour longer.

And there was always the cash-return form. That was what I was here about in the first place. It just didn't make sense for McCann to have held up his celebration while he filled out a form that he wouldn't be able to mail until he got back to Atronics City. And yet the company's handwriting experts were convinced that it wasn't a forgery, and I could pretty well take their word for it.

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Mulling these things over as I tramped back toward the dome, I suddenly heard a distant bell ringing way back in my head. The glimmering of an idea, not an idea yet but just the hint of one. I wasn't sure where it led, or even if it led anywhere at all, but I was going to find out.

KARPIN opened the doors for me. By the time I'd stripped off the suit he was back to work. He was cleaning the single unit which was his combination stove and refrigerator and sink and garbage disposal.

I looked around the dome again, and I had to admit that a lot of ingenuity had gone into the manufacture and design of this dome and its contents. The dome itself, when deflated, folded down into an oblong box three feet by one foot by one foot. The lock itself, of course, folded separately, into another box somewhat smaller than that.

As for the gear inside the dome, it was functional and collapsible, and there wasn't a single item there that wasn't needed. There were the two chairs and the two cots and the table, all of them foldaway. There was that fantastic combination job Karpin was cleaning right now, and that had dimensions of four feet by three feet by three feet. The clutter of gear over to the left wasn't as much of a clutter as it looked. There was a Geiger counter, an automatic spectrograph, two atmosphere suits, a torsion densiometer, a core-cutting drill, a few small hammers and picks, two spare air tanks, boxes of food concentrate, a paint tube, a doorless jimmy-john and two small metal boxes about eight inches cube. These last were undoubtedly Karpin's and McCann's pouches, where they kept whatever letters, money, address books or other small bits of possessions they owned. Back of this mound of gear, against the wall, stood the air reconditioner, humming quietly to itself.

In this small enclosed space there was everything a man needed to keep himself alive. Everything except human company. And if you didn't need human company, then you had everything. Just on the other side of that dome, there was a million miles of death, in a million possible ways. On this side of the dome, life was cozy, if somewhat Spartan and very hot.

I knew for sure I was going to get a head cold. My body had adjusted to the sixty-eight degrees inside the suit, finally, and now was very annoyed to find the temperature shooting up to ninety again.

Since Karpin didn't seem inclined to talk, and I would rather spend my time thinking than talking anyway, I took a hint

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from him and did some cleaning. I'd noticed a smeared spot about nose-level on the faceplate of my fishbowl, and now was as good a time as any to get rid of it. It had a tendency to make my eyes cross.

My shirt was sodden and wrinkled by this time anyway, having first been used to wipe sweat from my face and later been rolled into a ball and left on the chair when I went outside, so I used it for a cleaning rag, buffing like mad the silvered surface of the faceplate. Faceplates are silvered, not so the man inside can look out and no one else can look in, but in order to keep some of the more violent rays of the sun from getting through to the face.

I buffed for a while, and then I put the fishbowl on my head and looked through it. The spot was gone, so I went over and reattached it to the rest of the suit, and then settled back in my chair again and lit a cigarette.

Karpin spoke up. "Wish you wouldn't smoke. Makes it tough on the conditioner."

"Oh," I said. "Sorry." So I just sat, thinking morosely about nonforged cash-return forms, and coincidences, and likely spots to hide a body in the Asteroid Belt.

Where would one dispose of a body in the asteroids? I went back through my thinking on that topic, and I found holes big enough to drive Karpin's claim through. This idea of leaving the body on some worthless chunk of rock, for instance. If Karpin had killed his partner—and I was dead sure he had—he'd planned it carefully and he wouldn't be leaving anything to chance. Now, an asteroid isn't worthless to a prospector until that prospector has landed on it and tested it. *Karpin* might know that such-and-such an asteroid was nothing but worthless stone, but the guy who stops there and finds McCann's body might *not* know it.

No, Karpin wouldn't leave that to chance. He would get rid of that body, and he would do it in such a way that nobody would *ever* find it.

How? Not by leaving it on a worthless asteroid, and not by just pushing it off into space. The distance between asteroids is large, but so's the travel. McCann's body, floating around in the blackness, might just be found by somebody.

And that, so far as I could see, eliminated the possibilities. McCann's body was in the Belt. I'd eliminated both the asteroids themselves and the space around the asteroids as hiding places. What was left?

The sun, of course.

I thought that over for a while, rather surprised at myself for having noticed the possibil-

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ity. Now, let's say Karpin attaches a small rocket to McCann's body, stuffed into its atmosphere suit. He sets the rocket going, and off goes McCann. Not that he aims it toward the sun, that wouldn't work well at all. Instead of falling into the sun, the body would simply take up a long elliptical orbit *around* the sun, and would come back to the asteroids every few hundred years. No, he would aim McCann *back*, in the direction opposite to the direction or rotation of the asteroids. He would, in essence, slow McCann's body down, make it practically stop in relation to the motion of the asteroids. And then it would simply *fall* into the sun.

None of my ideas, it seemed, were happy ones. If McCann's body were even at this moment falling toward the sun, it was just as useful to me as if it were on some other asteroid.

But, wait a second. Karpin and McCann had worked with the minimum of equipment, I'd already noticed that. They didn't have extras of anything, and they certainly wouldn't have extra rockets. Except for one fast trip to Chemisant City—when he had neither the time nor the excuse to buy a jato rocket—Karpin had spent all of his time since McCann's death right here on this planetoid.

So that killed that idea.

While I was hunting around for some other idea, Karpin spoke up again, for the first time in maybe twenty minutes. "You think I killed him, don't you?" he said, not looking around from his cleaning job.

I considered my answer. There was no reason at all to be overly polite to this sour old buzzard, but at the same time I am naturally the soft-spoken type. "We aren't sure," I said. "We just think there are some odd items to be explained."

"Such as what?" he demanded.

"Such as the timing of McCann's cash-return form."

"I already explained that," he said.

"I know. You've explained everything."

"He wrote it out himself," the old man insisted. He put down his cleaning cloth, and turned to face me. "I suppose your company checked the handwriting already, and Jafe McCann is the one who wrote that form."

He was so blasted sure of himself. "It would seem that way," I said.

"What other odd items you worried about?" he asked me, in a rusty attempt at sarcasm.

"Well," I said, "there's this business of going to Chemisant City. It would have made more sense for you to go to Atronics City, where you were known."

"Chemisant was closer," he

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said. He shook a finger at me. "That company of yours thinks it can cheat me out of my money," he said. "Well, it can't. I know my rights. That money belongs to me."

"I guess you're doing pretty well without McCann," I said.

His angry expression was replaced by one of bewilderment. "What do you mean?"

"They told me back at Atronics City," I explained, "that McCann was the money expert and you were the metals expert, and that's why McCann handled all your buying on credit and stuff like that. Looks as though you've got a pretty keen eye for money yourself."

"I know what's mine," he mumbled, and turned away. He went back to scrubbing the stove coils again.

I stared at his back. Something had happened just then, and I wasn't sure what. He'd just been starting to warm up to a tirade against the dirty insurance company, and all of a sudden he'd folded up and shut up like a clam.

And then I saw it. Or at least I saw part of it. I saw how that cash-return form fit in, and how it made perfect sense.

Now, all I needed was proof of murder. Preferably a body. I had the rest of it. Then I could pack the old geezer back to Atronics City and get proof for the part I'd already figured out.

I'd like that. I'd like getting back to Atronics City, and having this all straightened out, and then taking the very next liner straight back to Earth. More immediately, I'd like getting out of this heat and back into the cool sixty-eight degrees of—

And then it hit me. The whole thing hit me, and I just sat there and stared. They did not carry extras, Karpin and McCann, they did not carry one item of equipment more than they needed.

I sat there and looked at the place where the dead body was hidden, and I said, "Well, I'll be a son of a gun!"

He turned and looked at me, and then he followed the direction of my gaze, and he saw what I was staring at, and he made a jump across the room at the revolver lying on the cot.

That's what saved me. He moved too fast, jerked his muscles too hard, and went sailing up and over the cot and ricocheted off the dome wall. And that gave me plenty of time to get up from the chair, moving more cautiously than he had, and get my hands on the revolver before he could get himself squared away again.

I straightened with the gun in my hand and looked into a face white with frustration and rage. "Okay, Mister McCann," I said. "It's all over."

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He knew I had him, but he tried not to show it. "What are you talking about? McCann's dead."

"Sure he is," I said. "Jafe McCann was the money-minded part of the team. He was the one who signed for all the loans and all the equipment bought on credit. With this big strike in, Jafe McCann was the one who'd have to pay all that money."

"You're babbling," he snapped, but the words were hollow.

"You weren't satisfied with half a loaf," I said. "You should have been. Half a loaf is better than none. But you wanted every penny you could get your hands on, and you wanted to pay out just as little money as you possibly could. So when you killed Ab Karpin, you saw a way to kill your debts as well. You'd *become* Ab Karpin, and it would be Jafe McCann who was dead, and the debts dead with him."

"That's a lie," he said, his voice getting shrill. "*I'm* Ab Karpin, and I've got papers to prove it."

"Sure. Papers you stole from a dead man. And you might have gotten away with it, too. But you just couldn't leave well enough alone, could you? Not satisfied with having the whole claim to yourself, you switched identities with your victim to avoid your debts. And not satisfied with *that*, you filled out a cash-return form and tried to collect your money as your own heir. *That's* why you had to go to Chemisant City, where nobody would recognize Ab Karpin or Jafe McCann, rather than to Atronics City where you were well-known."

You don't want to make too many wild accusations," he shouted, his voice shaking. "You don't want to go around accusing people of things you can't prove."

"I can prove it," I told him. "I can prove everything I've said. As to who you are, there's no problem. All I have to do is bring you back to Atronics City. There'll be plenty of people there to identify you. And as to proving you murdered Ab Karpin, I think his body will be proof enough, don't you?"

McCann watched me as I backed slowly around the room to the mound of gear. The partners had had no extra equipment, no extra equipment at all. I looked down at the two atmosphere suits lying side by side on the metallic rock floor.

Two atmosphere suits. The dead man was supposed to be in one of those, floating out in space somewhere. He was in the suit, right enough, I was sure of that, but he wasn't floating anywhere.

A space suit is a perfect place to hide a body, for as long as it has to be hid. The silvered faceplate keeps you from seeing in-

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side, and the suit is, naturally, a sealed atmosphere. A body can rot away to ashes inside a space suit, and you'll never notice a thing on the outside.

I'd had the right idea after all. McCann had planned to get rid of Karpin's body by attaching a rocket to it, slowing it down, and letting it fall into the sun. But he hadn't had an opportunity yet to go buy a rocket. He couldn't go to Atronics City, where he could have bought the rocket on credit, and he couldn't go to Chemisant City until the claim sale went through and he had some money to spend. And in the meantime, Karpin's body was perfectly safe, sealed away inside his atmosphere suit.

And it would have been safe, too, if McCann hadn't been just a little bit too greedy. He could kill his partner and get away with it; policemen on the Belt are even farther apart than the asteroids. He could swindle his creditors and get away with it; they had no way of checking up and no reason to suspect a switch in identities. But when he tried to get his own money back from Tangiers Mutual Insurance; *that's* when he made his mistake.

I studied the two atmosphere suits, at the same time managing to keep a wary eye on Jafe McCann, standing rigid and silent across the room. Which one of those suits contained the body of Ab Karpin?

The one with the new patch on the chest, of course. As I'd guessed, McCann had shot him, and that's why he had the problem of disposing of the body in the first place.

I prodded that suit with my toe. "He's in there, isn't he?"

"You're crazy."

"Think I should open it up and check? It's been almost a month, you know. I imagine he's pretty ripe by now."

I reached down to the neck-fastenings on the fishbowl, and McCann finally moved. His arms jerked up, and he cried, "Don't! He's in there, he's in there! For God's sake, don't open it up!"

I relaxed. Mission accomplished. "Crawl into your suit, little man," I said. "We've got ourselves a trip to make, the three of us."

Henderson, as usual, was jovial but stern. "You did a fine job up there, Ged," he said, with false familiarity. "Really brilliant work."

"Thank you very much," I said. I was holding the last piece of news for a minute or two, relishing it.

"But you brought McCann in over a week ago. I don't see why you had to stay up at Atronics City at all after that, much less ten days."

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I sat back in the chair and negligently crossed my legs. "I just thought I'd take a little vacation," I said carelessly, and lit a cigarette. I flicked ashes in the general direction of the ashtray on Henderson's desk. Some of them made it.

"A vacation?" he echoed, eyes widening. Henderson was a company man, a *real* company man. A vacation for him was purgatory, it was separation from a loved one. "I don't believe you have a vacation coming," he said frostily, "for at least six months."

"That's what you think, Henny," I said.

All he could do at that was blink.

I went on, enjoying myself hugely. "I don't like this company," I said. "And I don't like this job. And I don't like you. And from now on, I've decided, it's going to be vacation all the time."

"Ged," he said, his voice faint, "what's the matter with you? Don't you feel well?"

"I feel well," I told him. "I feel fine. Now, I'll tell you why I spent an extra ten days at Atronics City. McCann made and registered the big strike, right?"

Henderson nodded blankly, apparently not trusting himself to speak.

"Wrong," I said cheerfully. "McCann went to Chemisant City and filled out all the forms required for registering a claim. But every place he was supposed to sign his name he wrote *Ab Karpin* instead. Jafe McCann *never did make a legal registration of his claim.*"

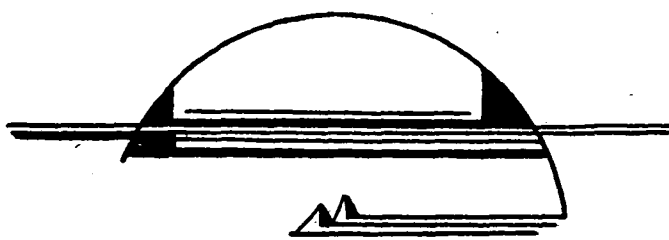
Henderson just looked fish-eyed.

"So," I went on, "as soon as I turned McCann over to the law at Atronics City, I went and registered that claim myself. And then I waited around for ten days until the company finished the paperwork involved in buying that claim from me. And then I came straight back here, just to say goodbye to you. Wasn't that nice?"

He didn't move.

"Goodbye," I said.

THE END



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The Yes Men of Venus

By RON GOULART

Privileged we are to bring you this historic story—one which will warm the manly hearts of the legion of devoted admirers of that venerable fantasist, Arthur Wright Beemis.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: let me begin by expressing my thanks to the executors of the Arthur Wright Beemis Estate for choosing me to complete his unfinished stories, of which this is to be the first. Like so many others I have long been an admirer of the books of the venerable fantasist. Nothing has ever given me the thrill that reading his first novel, *Roo-So Of The Jungle*, in installments of varying length in the old *Thursby's All-Star Electrical Fiction Weekly* did. Unless it was reading the twenty three sequels, especially *Roo-So's Revenge* and *Roo-So, Friend Of Animals*.

This present story belongs with Beemis' planet adventure yarns. It was in the winter months of 1929 that Arthur Wright Beemis penned the first of his many scientifiction novels. In an era when space travel was little known or speculated on Beemis had his likeable two-fisted hero, Hyacinth Robinson, travel between planets with ease. Hyacinth Robinson, as you may remember, had been standing too near a reservoir in upstate New York and when the water evaporated he went with it, eventually drifting to Venus where most of *Vandals Of Venus* takes place. This story was an instant hit and was soon followed by *Vagrants of Venus, Mermen Of Mars, Misfits Of The Moon, Plundered On Pluto* and many more.

Now that many of Beemis' books are freely available it was felt by his estate that his unfinished work should also be given to the public. So here is the new Beemis we have all been waiting for.

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Chapter 1: A Minor Cataclysm

MY heart was heavy as I drifted over the remote reaches of the Pacific Ocean in the atomic powered Zeppelin the World League of Peaceful Governments had thoughtfully allowed me to borrow in order to show their gratitude for my having ended the 4th World War several weeks ahead of time with my lucky discovery of a powerful ray that made gun powder ineffectual. This balloon cruise, as pleasant as it was, had been planned as more than just a dedicated scientific attempt to map the migratory routes of the Arctic Curlew. It was to have been, too, my wedding journey.

As I followed, with my binoculars, the happily paired curlews flapping to warmer climes I tried to think of some reason for the unpleasant turn events had taken. When I had called for my beloved Joanna on the prior morning her father, the noted munitions tycoon, John Plunderbund Brimstone, had left, not his best wishes for a safe honeymoon but, rather, orders for myself and my Zeppelin to be thrown unceremoniously from the grounds. All my leaden heart could be sure of was that I would never again walk hand in hand with the handsomest, most athletic and yet feminine, girl in the state of New Jersey. The thought of what I was doing would have brought tears to my eyes had I not been as masculine and manly as I am. For the curlew was the one bird that my Joanna and I had always thought of as *our* bird.

But the rapid deflation of my Zeppelin vanquished all self pity from my mind. I was galvanized into action. Placing my binoculars back in their case, I dived without further thought from the gondola of the falling Zeppelin and into the placid waters of the Pacific Ocean. Perhaps some well placed parting shot from one of the minions of Joanna's father had done its slow work and been the cause of the untimely cessation of my means of transportation.

I am an excellent swimmer and so there was no dread on my part of the long swim ahead. However, I had barely covered a mile when I became aware that something was tugging rather forebodingly at my ankle. My impression was that I had caught my foot in the compelling maw of some great clam. Before I could reflect more the creature had pulled at me so forcefully that my head, the hair of which I wore in a somewhat long though manly fashion, was yanked below the breath stopping waters of the ocean in which I had so recently found myself. I fought bravely, being an excellent boxer. An old ring axiom has it that

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a good big man can beat a good little man. However, most rules of honest boxing were not made with giant clams in mind. For one thing, I could not be sure if I was fouling the creature or not. As I struggled I became more and more lightheaded and giddy. As I drove an excellent jab home to what I hoped was a vital spot of the clam I suddenly lost consciousness.

Chapter 2: The Mysterious Host

I CAME to in a clean white bed with a large handsome man looking down at me. He was a striking fellow. To give you some idea I will simply say that this man, whose name I soon learned was Lowell Hawthorne, was even better developed and more manfully handsome than myself.

"You've had a bit of a close shave, old man," he said, gripping my shoulder in a perfectly manly way.

"American, aren't you?"

"Right you are, old man," he said. "Mabu, my native boy and Numba, his native boy, fished you out of the briny. Scared the simple fellows a bit at first. They're not used to finding chaps such as yourself inside giant clams. I had some talking to do to convince them you weren't a large pearl or some such thing."

"I believe it is oysters rather than clams that are best known for their pearls," I said, good naturedly, for I took to his handsome, though mysterious, American almost at once.

"Who can tell a native anything?" was his honest reply.

"I suppose I am to be laid up here for a time," I said.

"A few days," said Hawthorne, drawing a bamboo chair near to my side. "If you don't object I'd like to tell you a few of my adventures. For, if I do say so myself, my life has been both curious and strange."

"By all means," I encouraged, being anxious to learn more of this enigmatic man who apparently lived contentedly here among savages and giant clams.

"I can tell by your look," he began, "that you are a man of science and that you may at first be a bit skeptical. Let me begin by saying that for the past five years I have been in close radio contact with a man living inside the planet Venus."

"Inside?" I asked. "Come, Hawthorne. Science is well aware that people live on the outside of that damp junglous planet. But inside?"

"Put aside all your scientific learning for a moment," my new friend replied. "If you do you may learn something. At least you will have whiled away your convalescence."

So he began the odd and compelling narrative that you will read in the next chapter.

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Chapter 3: Down And Out On Mars

I AM the reincarnation, began Hawthorne, of an Egyptian priest, whose name if I were to mention it you would recognize as being as familiar to you as your own. Having lived several lives I reached this one with more than the usual sense of ennui. I tried many things, shopkeeping, the cavalry, gold prospecting, writing for the magazines. None of these helped, nor could love. For in ancient Egypt I had loved a handsome and sporting priestess named Isis. After her all other women were antielimactic. As Fate would have it, she whom I sincerely and respectfully loved, never seemed to get reincarnated during the same era as myself. You know how women are about keeping appointments.

One evening toward the end of 1970 I was strolling through Central Park long after the hour when most men thought it safe. To a man such as myself, a man who fought the Red Indians without a qualm, the worst terrors of Central Park after dark held no dred. Still I was taken aback when seven youths fell upon me with baseball bats. You have perhaps found, as I did that night, that even a superb physical being is no match for seven men with little respect for the correct way of life, and large clubs. Though I maimed and injured a good number of them I was nevertheless knocked unconscious.

When I awoke and took a step I bounced twelve feet into the air.

Some reappraisal of my surroundings seemed in order. Central Park had surely changed considerably. It was now a great red desert. I took another step and bounced again. Then the awesome truth came home to me. I was no longer in Central Park. I was on Mars.

I am aware that you scientifically inclined chaps talk of space travel as being a remote possibility. You will realize, of course, that in 1970 no such thing was even at the experimental stage. Therefore I knew I had been transported to the Red Planet by some mystical means there is no way to explain.

I was still engrossed in seeing how high I could bounce when three large green men rode toward me mounted on gigantic hairy horses that boasted two extra sets of legs. The green men themselves were twenty feet high and turned out to have, now that I noticed, an extra set of green arms. This is not the sort of sight someone who has only recently been battered with wooden clubs wishes to see on awakening.

But appearances are not always the best indication of the man and I soon found my green welcomers to be quite decent. By

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means of a method too complex to burden you with we soon taught each other our respective languages.

The green men were named Yarl Zun, Zin Yerg and Yex Zurb. I explained to them that I had apparently transmigrated to Mars by some strange means.

"You picked a bad time to transmigrate," said Yarl Zun, shaking his great green head.

"Why is that?"

The three of them proceeded to explain to me as we shared a breakfast of kex, which is rather like our cold oatmeal, that Mars was in the midst of a great depression. It seems that the head of their government, the Daktor, who is roughly equivalent to two of our presidents, had been wooed into the camp of the more radical element in the Martian society and instead of listening to his Yax-Daktros, or well-wishers as we would call them, and building up comforting supplies of zugbeams, or what we would call deathrays, he had foolishly poured the taxpayers money into Yerb, which is something like our social security. The result was rampant radicalism and poverty with little or no respect for Goomba, roughly equal to our patriotism.

The upshot of this enlightening political indoctrination was that I would have a tough time making my way on Mars at the moment. Zin Yerg and the rest helpfully offered to bat me over the head with Zoobs, roughly equivalent to our baseball bats, in the hope that I might then transmigrate back to Earth. I, though, having been an optimist in nine out of ten of my previous reincarnations, decided to brazen it out. Stick I would and albeit I was down and out at the moment I felt I would not be for long.

Such was indeed the case, as I will next relate.

Chapter 4: The Great Games Of Maroom

I THREW in my lot with the green men who were, it evolved, enroute to Maroom, the capital of this country, to enroll in the Great Games. It is difficult for me to find a parallel on our own planet for these Great Games. What transpired at them, as I was to learn only too well and shortly, was this. The bloodthirsty citizens of Maroom flock to a large stadium and there witness various fellows fighting one another and also great and ferocious beasts, of which there are many on this depression-torn planet. Should a poor mendicant triumph in one of these gruesome contests he is awarded a cash prize. This explains why the down-and-out of Mars flock to Maroom.

To Maroom then my new friends and I made our way. For

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although on Mars I was now called Yar Sud, or Shortly, I still vowed that I would beat any man or beast I came up against in fair combat. Especially if there was money involved.

We had hardly reached the suburbs of the great and decadent capital when I heard a girl screaming in a tone that indicated her very honor was at stake. Borrowing a sword from Yex Zurb I jumped from my riding position just to the rear of his saddle and ran toward the scene of the struggle.

My green acquaintances had informed me that the green men were not the only race on Mars. There was also a pink skinned human type much like myself only taller. Still I was not prepared as I dived into the murky, sward-choked alley between two crumbling ruins to see before me a girl of striking beauty of figure being pummeled by a large pink man in a leather suit.

"One kiss is all I request," the man pleaded in a slimy voice that was far from manly.

"One will lead to another," the girl responded in a tone I admired. "Soon you will require other favors."

"One little kiss. By Zarg (their idea of God)! If you don't kiss me quickly, Dina Taurus, I will have you locked away where kissing is out of the question."

"Lock if you will," said the brave girl. "For kiss you I never shall."

I waited to hear no more. "Stand, sir!" I cried. "The young lady does not wish to be kissed."

The man was nearly eight feet high, though it was evident that his pursuit of physical gratification left little room for a careful program of physical fitness. "Beat it, Yar Sud," he bellowed. "Do you dare to interfere with a Yax-Tarkas on his appointed rounds?"

"I don't know what a Yax-Tarkas is," I replied, "But I know that my blade will cut you down if you don't depart this woman's side at once."

His only reply was an angry grunt. He then came at me with sword drawn. In my student days in Paris I had astounded my teachers with my ability as a foilsman. Fortunately, on Mars they fence in the Parisian manner and I was soon able to run the pleasure bent Yax-Tarkas through and then dispose of his body in a pit beneath the ruins.

When I returned to the heavy breathing girl I suddenly gasped. "Isis!" I cried. For she, indeed, it was.

"My name is Dina Taurus," she replied. "I do thank you for aiding me. For your kind act, though, I fear you will incur the wrath of all Maroom."

"My own Isis," I continued. "Whom I have not seen for near-

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ly two dozen reincarnations. Don't you remember me. Have you forgotten Egypt, my love?"

"You speak, sir, of love," the girl said in a tender voice. "I was about to bring up the topic myself. I feel somehow that even though you are shorter than most you are a man I could someday marry and kiss freely. I fear I have never met you before."

"Look, look," I said, beginning to draw a map of the solar system in the dust of the alley with the tip of my recently engored sword. "Look there." I proceeded to explain where the planet Earth was in relation to Mars and then where Egypt had been. I told of our great love on that spot. "No wonder I haven't been able to find you again," I concluded. "You've been reincarnating here on another planet. Be that as it may, Isis, we are together again."

"As you talk and as I look at your handsome face it comes upon me more strongly that I am fond of you. Isis, however, I am not. Dina Taurus, a simple shopgirl, is who I am. As Dina Taurus I sincerely hope you will find your way clear to love me."

She was my own Isis and yet she had no recollection of it. I determined to court her under whatever name she was using. Once you have loved a woman such as Isis it is hard to shake the habit. "Dina Taurus you shall be," I smiled. "Dina Taurus, I love you and ask your leave to pay court to you."

"My leave you have had since the moment you leaped into this fetid alley," she replied tenderly. "Tell me, by the way, what is your name?"

"My name is Lowell Hawthorne."

From behind us a grim voice spoke, "Lowell Hawthorne, we take you prisoner in the name of the City and County of Maroom."

A dozen heavily armed men had approached us quietly while we had talked of love. "What is the charge?"

"Killing a Yax-Tarkas and throwing him in a pit. Come along with us."

To my new found Dina Taurus I whispered, "Just what is a Yax-Tarkas, my love?"

"The talent agent for the Great Games," she gasped as the lawmen carted me away.

That is how I came to be sentenced to fight in the arena of Maroom.

Chapter 5: In The Dungeons

MY cellmate in the dark stone room under the arena was a handsome tanned man named Joel Lars. We soon became fast friends, not merely because we were padlocked together but because we shared a great community of interests and also be-

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lieved in the manly virtues and a planned program of daily exercise.

"We will not be called into the arena for many days," Joel Lars told me.

"Unfortunate," I said." For I have only now remet a girl for whom I have searched many centuries on many worlds."

"Too bad," he replied with real sympathy. "Speaking of girls, would you care to hear my story?"

"It would help pass the dark hours here."

"It took place on Venus, which as you may know, is a planet in this system of ours."

"I am a great admirer of that planet," I said. "Please to continue."

"Of the overall surface of that planet I know little," went on Joel Lars. "Of its interior I know only too much. For it is there that the only woman I will ever love, Virl Yank, is at this moment a captive of the fiendish Yes Men of Venus."

"How does she happen to be inside Venus?" I asked.

"Let me go back a bit," said Joel Lars. "My parents were missionaries and one fine day they took their spaceship to Venus. Our crewmen proved disloyal and in a dispute over shorter hours they threw my beloved parents and myself over the side. We were stranded in the steamy jungles and my parents soon succumbed to the moist living. I, a mere boy of seven, survived and was raised to manhood by the Boogdabs, what the Martians would call Yarznigs, roughly equivalent to the Earth's great apes."

"What of the cursed Yes Men and your dear Virl Yank?"

"Being raised by great apes has a strange effect on one, " answered Joel Lars. "It took several years of therapy to completely rid me of the idea that I might be an ape myself. I still dream sometimes that my mother was. Now, as to the Yes Men."

His narrative was cut short at this point by the arrival of a group of guards who flung our cell open and pulled us to our feet. "There has been a last minute cancellation," one of them, a coarse hairy fellow, explained. "The star gladiator is ill and you two will have to go on in his place."

CLOSING NOTE: what transpired next would fill a book itself. And this is exactly what my agent has advised me to do with it.

THE END

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The Fifth Stone

By ALFRED COPPEL

What lay behind this family of accident prones? Was it something in the blood? Generation after generation falling into the same trap. John Marsh had to find out and there was only one way—join the family!

THE man who had died once and would die again and still live, lay on the hospital cot. Blood and saline oozed from the racked jars and flowed through a tangle of plastic tubes into his veins. The electrocardiograph recorded a failing heart action. A sphygmograph needle traced the weakening pulse.

John Marsh had only minutes of life left to him and Calder, the therapist from BuPsych, watched the splintered wreckage on the cot with compassion. No matter what Marsh had done, he was dying a horrible death for it, his face and body bloated and torn from internal pressures, his tendons and muscles ripped from broken bones, his flesh burned and frozen and tinted blueblack by his own ruptured blood vessels. An unprotected man in space goes through hell before he dies.

The Spaceforce line officer, a captain with silver lightnings on the peak of his cap and a delta-winged rocket on his breast, frowned at the medic who stood apart in the far corner of the room.

The medic shook his head. "I'm sorry. He's dying and there's nothing more we can do about it."

The captain held his clenched fists against the seam of his trousers. His knuckles were white. When he spoke there was hopeless fury in his voice. "I only wish I could kill him with my own hands."

The words hung in the humming stillness. In the corridor could be heard the

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Madness, destruction, and the point of no return.

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measured pacing of the double guard. Beyond the barred windows a meteor streaked across the starfields. Another.

"He won't last the night," Calder said. Because his training was emphatic, he could *feel* Marsh dying.

"We've been damned lucky to keep him alive this long," the medic said, "Staff has done a job on him." He was thinking that no one really appreciated just how good a job had been needed to keep John Marsh alive even for an hour, let alone two days. He looked at Calder and the captain from under lowered brows. The damned brasshat only wanted Marsh alive so he could be killed legally. Well, that was his business and in a way it was too bad he wasn't going to get his way. Certainly Marsh deserved the worst. But a higher authority was taking it out of the captain's hands and he was going to have to be satisfied with what Marsh had already suffered. Calder, now, was different. The BuPsych man looked as though he had his teeth into something. The way he handled those tapes and wires—like they were pure gold. It was chilling the way BuPsych people could *get inside* and actually *be* someone. That damned empathic training. Perhaps that was why they all seemed so vague and blank when they weren't working. To be really empathic, you couldn't have any real personality of your own to get in the way.

The medic sighed and turned back to his death watch, awaiting the last minutes.

Calder began collecting his equipment. The recorder, the tapes, the subvocal micropickups.

"Will you be able to make anything out of all that?" the captain asked. "I couldn't hear a goddam thing."

"Those things are so sensitive they can almost seem to pick up thoughts," Calder said. "Not really, of course. But if there's enough life left in a subject for any sort of subvocalization, they'll tape it."

The captain's long face seemed carved from polished bone. Only his eyes were alive, and they were burning. "How soon will you have it all transcribed?"

"It'll take some time," Calder said. "It's like doing an analysis. Only I have to be both the therapist and the analysand. You can't rush it."

"The court of inquiry convenes at 0800 hours tomorrow. Be prepared to make

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your presentation then," the captain said curtly.

Calder suppressed an unmilitary protest. There were documents to examine, and records. Then the tapes. He would have to actually *become* Marsh and live the crucial periods of his life. It could be done in a night, with the help of stay-awake pills. But his effectiveness would be impaired and so would his defenses against total transference.

"I could use more time, sir," Calder said.

"The court is at 0800 hours."

"Yes, sir."

The captain's bone-gray face showed his inner tension. "We have to know why. That's what's important. Why, and how to prevent it happening again."

"This isn't the first time, is it?" Calder asked, fishing.

"Has there been a breach of security, Mister Calder?" The captain spoke in a harsh, flat voice.

"Rumors, sir. And a classmate of mine was on the Wheel two years ago."

The captain walked slowly across the room to look down into the shattered face. "Another one of Timur Denby's sons. In spite of everything we did to keep them down. Damn them all!" His face grew livid with hate and the medic tensed, watching.

Quite abruptly, the captain straightened and walked swiftly from the room. Calder heard the clash of metal as the guards saluted and then the sound of steel-shod footsteps echoing down the corridor.

The medic let his breath out with a sigh. "He wasn't kidding, was he?"

Calder shook his head slowly.

"What was that Denby business?"

"David Denby. That's his name. John Marsh is an alias."

The medic studied the figure on the cot. "*The* Timur Denby's son?"

"The youngest," Calder said, locking his instrument case.

"I'll be damned. A First Lander's brat. It's hard to believe, isn't it?"

"Is it?"

"I thought the captain was really going to do what he said. With his bare hands."

"Most spacemen would feel the same way."

"They're giving out it was an accident, I suppose."

"That's probably what they'll say."

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The medic shook his head disbelievingly. "A First Lander's kid—" He glanced at Calder. "Was he—you know—crazy?"

Calder frowned at the use of what his elementary psych instructors would have called a polarized word.

"I mean," the medic said, "five hundred people. And his own crew. Well—"

"And New Providence," Calder said. "It was more than mass murder. It was—" He shrugged. "Is there a word for it?"

The medic watched the flickering pulse of the sphygmograph needle. It flickered once. Twice. Again. And was still.

"If there is a word," he said, "he'll never hear it. He's finally gone."

Calder picked up his recorder. He had the curious feeling of being custodian of a man's soul. All that was left of David Denby, alias Captain John Marsh, was on Calder's tapes.

He watched the medic cover the dead face before he turned and quietly left the room.

The old-fashioned study lamp cast a pool of light on the desktop. The files and related documents had been examined, but only part of the mystery was dispelled.

His name was David Denby, and he was born in the industrial slums of the Mars Colony, New Providence. He grew up there, the youngest of five brothers: Isaiah, Mark, Charles, Dennison, and David. Father: Timur Denby, crewman of the *Hound of Heaven*, the first ship to arrive safely on Mars. Mother: unknown, presumed dead. So the files read.

Like all his brothers, David went into space as a racketman. For a Marschild there were only two choices. The space service or work in the huge industrial complexes of New Providence. He rose from jetman to section officer to astrogator, and finally to second pilot.

There the trail marked David Denby ended.

A year later, a second pilot of Martian colonial origin obtained command of the *Roc*, a fairish chemical rocket of 500 tons thrust. The man's name was John Marsh.

That much you knew from the trail of forms and records any man leaves behind him. Even a new identity can be uncovered and attached to a man's history. No problem for CIA and Spaceforce Intelligence. No problem at all,

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Calder thought wryly, *after the fact.*

Item. Denby became Marsh —took two weeks and a day from the time that Charles Denby's ship, *Cygnus,* exploded a hundred miles from the Wheel on a routine flight from Mars.

There was a pattern too obvious to miss. Isaiah and Mark lost in the *Goddard.* Charles in *Cygnus,* Dennison in the *Stella Polaris.* And now David Denby in the *Roc.*

Spaceflight was hazardous, yes. But not that hazardous. Atomics were still in the future, perhaps a hundred years in the future for spaceships. Venus was an impenetrable formaldehyde desert, the Outer Planets methane glaciers. Only Mars could be exploited for needed ores. Uranium, iron, tungsten, platinum, palladium, everything the home world needed. So flight into space was a regulated, almost routine thing. Barring accidents.

But five accidents in the same family? What was it that line captain had said? "Another one of Timur Denby's sons. In spite of everything we did to keep them down."

Calder rubbed his chin with the back of his hand and cursed his job. This was like trying to restore a portrait out of scattered flecks of paint. A ravaged near-corpse picked up in space. Personal effects. A book of old poems amidst the spinning, orbiting debris of the *Roc.* And old man's blindness. Timur Denby had lost his sight in a hydrazine explosion and had never returned to Earth with the *Hound.* Was that significant, Calder wondered? What had the old man done those two years alone on Mars while the *Hound* returned home to the Wheel to report Mars ready for the taking?

Calder had never been to Mars, but he had seen the antiquities a few of the spacemen brought home with them. The jade carvings, the fragmented mosaics, the delicately alien figurines. All created by the race vanished a million years before men left their caves.

He suppressed a shiver. What had two years alone with that incredibly ancient past done to Timur Denby and the woman crew member who presumably remained with him to bear his sons?

Somehow it must all be woven together into a pattern acceptable to eleven stone-faced officers of a court of inquiry. Because in some way it

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led to David Denby's vicious, wantonly destructive, treasonable crime.

He opened the thin volume of poems. It was an old book, very old. But of terrestrial origin. He smiled at that thought. Had he expected it to be some sort of Rosetta Stone for the undeciphered ancient Martian glyphs? Who would be interested in this era of ruthless expansion anyway? Empathy again. Already he was beginning to feel like one of Timur Denby's sons.

Some of the pages were heavily underscored. The lines were drawn with a modern stylus, so it must have been David and not Timur who chose the lines to emphasize. He began to read slowly.

Oh bless your blindness, glory in your groping—

People didn't write like that any more; the line had a quality of exaltation that was missing from modern life.

He read on until he came to another underscored line.

Sling your fifth stone, oh son of mine, and win—

Calder closed the book, holding the place with his fingers. The fifth stone. He opened the book once more and reread the line.

He had the feeling of looking without seeing, of knowing without understanding. The line was obviously opposite.

He stood up and lit a cigarette thoughtfully. He looked at the recorder. He was avoiding it because the key to the puzzle was so tantalizingly *there*.

He was almost afraid to be David Denby for the space of an hour.

He dropped his cigarette, half-smoked, into the disposal slot and forced himself to sit down again.

Time was getting short.

He sighed and reached for the switch. The plastic tape began to run from one spool to another.

He snapped off the desk lamp and the square of the window came alive with stars. The skyglow from the shops and working areas of Mojave couldn't dim the brilliance of the moonless desert night. He watched the meteor-fragments fall and burn, fall and burn. Someone had estimated it would be eight months before the last of the debris stopped falling.

He leaned back in his chair and began the pre-empathic relaxing exercises. The recorder hummed hypnotically in the darkened room.

Through the background

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noises picked up by the supersensitive instrument — the sighing of breath into lacerate lungs, the whisper of sluggish, cooling blood flowing through veins and arteries, the incipient cannibalistic feast-noises of self-degestion that accompany dying—he could hear David Denby communicating.

The sprawling complex of the great, useless spaceport beyond the walls of his room faded into unreality as the transference began.

A thousand years earlier men would have said he was being possessed. He would have crouched in a pentagram and the smoke of incense would have filled the air in his room.

Now it was only the hum of the recorder as the dead mind of David Denby crept into his.

And then he *was* David Denby, going home to Mars.

I was on the Wheel when they told me about Dennison. They didn't know I was his brother, of course, or they would never have said anything at all to me. They would have just taken the *Roc* away and given her to someone else.

There was even talk about some of the crews meeting in New Providence and lynching the old man. They knew that somehow he was behind it all.

In a way, I felt the same as the rest of them did. Yes, Timur was my father and I was the missing fifth son everyone was ready to fear, but I have been a spaceman all my life and I felt as the rest did that what my brothers did was worse than murder. I didn't know then what it was they were *trying* to do. If I had, I might have been ready to kill Timur with my own hands.

On the outward flight to Mars, my crew talked of nothing else but Dennison and the *Stella Polaris*. It happened only two hundred miles from the Wheel and the ship had been locked on radar control so everyone saw the blowup. There were no survivors. No, no one could *prove* Dennison was responsible, but the word Denby was the same as Jonah by this time.

And so I found myself going home. Someone, I forget now who it was, had seen Timur on his last trip to New Providence, and the rumor was that he was dying.

Among spacemen, that was a happy rumor.

I had to see for myself. I thought then that it was only this that drew me back to the stinking hovel where I was

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born, amid the slagheaps and the filthy industrial rubble of the Old City.

We lived close to the alien legends in the Old City. My father had lived there alone with my mother long before New Providence was built. He was blinded by an explosion and couldn't return on the first ship, the *Hound*. My mother—I never knew her, she died when I was born—stayed with him. She was a technician for the original expedition and Timur must have been a handsome man because she stayed with him in spite of his blindness—or maybe because of it. I don't know. As I say, I never knew her, but she would have had to be a remarkable woman to face two years alone on Mars with only a blind man for companion. By the time I was born, the Old City was a rubbish heap. But I remember that my brother Mark, who was my favorite, used to tell me that he remembered it differently. All I know is that my earliest memories are of filth, privation, and hostility from our neighbors.

I've said we lived close to the old legends. We all did. But even so, our family was set apart. I think it was those two years Timur and my mother spent alone on the planet before the second expedition landed. People said Timur had learned things no man should learn and that he had become something *different*.

I used to lie awake on my narrow bed and listen to the music coming from the bars and honkytonks across the canal and I'd wish with all my heart that I were a real Earthman and that some day I could go home. At that time I thought of Earth, the Earth I had never seen, as my home.

Timur's old shipmates used to come across to the Old City —Dumptown, they called it— for a visit with my father whenever their ships landed at the spaceport on the other side of New Providence. I'd sit and listen to them talk about home, about the oceans I'd never seen, about skies that were pale blue and not dark at midday, about trees and green grass and great teeming cities full of aircraft. I was about ten then, and Earth was my fairyland.

But Timur would only scowl and nibble on the bitter lichens he liked so well and pretty soon the old shipmates would feel uncomfortable, as though they were in the presence of an alien of some kind, and they would leave.

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The kindest of them would say to me, "Your old man's gone native, Davy. He's a regular Marski now." Which was supposed to be funny because the Martians had all died millions of years ago and left only the old ruins.

It was when Isaiah left home to sign as able spaceman on the *Centaur* that I realized for the first time that Timur hated Earth.

Before Isaiah left, Timur took him away into the hills, toward the crumbled ruins on the edge of Solis Lacus. They spent what seemed to me a long time there, and when my brother returned, he was *different*. I mean that. His face was the same and he walked and talked the same way, but he was suddenly apart from Mark and Charles and Denny and me. He was *with* Timur. And deep down inside I could feel that both of them had shared something the rest of us knew nothing about.

I was only thirteen then, around eight by Martian count, and I could have been mistaken.

But when it came Mark's turn to go. I knew it was no mistake. Mark changed, too, after that visit to the hills. And after he had gone, I began to grow afraid.

All my brothers left in their turn. Isaiah was lost on the *Goddard*, together with Mark. Mark signed on the *Goddard* because he wanted to be with his brother, and so both of them died.

Then Charles left, and finally Dennison, and I found myself alone with Timur.

By this time, his old shipmates had all either died or stopped making the trek across the canal to Dumptown. The children of the mine and smelter workers who lived near us hated me because I was the son of a First Lander and therefore a kind of dirt poor aristocrat aand at the same time I was Timur's son, and Timur was queer, crazy, blind, and he hated Earth.

I didn't hate Earth. The music room from across the canal, the neon lights burning

"Yes, I have a match!"

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at night, the tinsel and excitement of New Providence, symbolized for me all that was wonderful and exciting.

What I did hate was our grinding poverty, and the sight of my father's milk-white eyes, and having to read to him from the old books he and mother had brought from Earth , and most of all I hated the prospect of my initiation trip into the hills that was surely coming.

I was afraid of the old ruins. I think now that I was afraid of old Timur, too. Not that he was cruel to me. Only that he was so different from everyone else. And at sixteen the last thing I wanted was to be different—like that.

Perhaps this is hindsight, but it seems to me now that I was always conscious of a *presence* around Timur. And when my brothers came back from the ruins, it was the same with them. I feared that more than anything else. It made me long for the hell-raising, wanton gaiety of New Providence and more important, the planet New Providence belonged to.

The Old City was part of Mars somehow, built on the remains of the ancient Martian town. New Providence, with its factories and mines and theatres and ginmills and the rowdy men from the industries and the spaceport—that was Earth.

And so, two weeks before by eighteenth birthday, I ran away.

The Old City school wasn't so bad that I couldn't work my way into a technical job in New Providence. And from there, I followed my brothers into the space service.

It was an unkindness, leaving a blind old man. I knew it. But a combination of fear and desire for things terrestrial combined to give me the power to rationalize my actions.

I seldom went back. And when I did, I hated it, and Timur was constrained with me. I gave him money, as Charles and Dennison did, but he lived in the same way as he always had. As though physical discomforts affected him not at all. He refused to move out of Dumptown.

Then Charles was lost in the *Cygnus*, and the name Denby was becoming famous again. For all the wrong reasons.

I was in line for a command of my own and the owners of the ship told me that no crew would fly with a Captain named Denby.

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So I became John Marsh.

But I was still Timur's son, and when Dennison died and I was the only one left, I resolved to go and see my father.

That's how I returned home to Mars. I had to discover Timur's influence.

The years had taught me something. I no longer loved the bustle of New Providence or, for that matter, of London, or Mojave, or New York.

The child's illusions are the man's disappointments and I had had my full share.

There had been a marriage in Los Angeles. It lasted two trips. I wasn't an Earthman. I was a colonial Martian and the differences were too much to adjust. We parted bitter friends.

The cities of Earth were crowded, noisy, frenetic. The blue sky was there, but it had to be seen from a rising Wheel taxi or a high mountain because of the pall of smog and grime. The people were confused, rapacious, and ambitious. For what, I could never understand. For *more*, perhaps. But as I say, I was a colonial. There are things I do not value.

It may be that in the back of my mind was the hope that returning to the place of my birth would give me something to believe in.

The Old City had not changed. It was still a wretched rash of hovels, a festering hole on the dry face of Mars. The shanties were built right down to the highwater mark on the canal bank, and the whole area stank of industrial refuse.

I walked through the narrow streets followed by a band of ragged urchins who stared at my uniform and occasionally darted up to beg for a few coins. This was a thing unique to colonial Mars. The poor of Earth didn't beg. No one would have listened to them.

The house, if you can call it that, where I was born, was on the far outskirts of Dumptown. I saw it again with mixed emotions.

I had hated this place as a child, but now, as a man, I hated it more because I had been abroad and I knew there was no place really very different. The hopelessness of that made my feelings venomous.

There was a boy with Timur in the shanty when I stepped through the half-open door. The boy looked at my uniform with hungry eyes and then ran, scuttling through the door without

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touching me and vanishing amid the slagheaps. Some unwanted brat dropped by one of the women from across the canal and brought to Dumptown to be sold. Timur must have taken him as a substitute pair of eyes. It could have been worse. In many cases it was. Vice was a principal industry in the Old City.

There was an animal smell in the cold room. My father sat in his ancient chair near the open window, listening to the distant roar of Bessemer steel converters across the canal.

I thought of my four brothers, and of our name being synonymous everywhere in space with murder and sabotage. And this made me speak without compassion, even though I could see that Timur was very old and obviously failing.

"Timur—" For some reason I could not call him "father." "Timur," I said. "Dennison is dead."

The blind eyes turned toward me and I shuddered. The ravaged face was terrible to see. He sighed and the sound was like the long-remembered whispering of the marswind. I was, for an instant, a child again and lying on my pallet in this very room and listening to the voice of Mars drifting on the cold wind from the north.

"Did you hear me? I said Dennison is dead."

"I heard," he said.

I could sense it already, that differentness, that feeling of alien presence.

"They say he wrecked his own ship," I said bitterly.

"I know," Timur said. "Is that why you have come back? You ran away before I could teach you. I had four sons and they are all gone now."

I hated him suddenly, the stink of him, and the calm way he disowned me, and above all I hated the gray memories that bound me to him and to my four dead brothers, memories that would not let me turn away now and accept his disownment.

"Answer me," he said slowly. "Have you come back because Dennison is dead and now there's only you?"

It seemed that senility had claimed him at last as he answered his own question in a rasping voice.

"Yes, you've come back."

He rustled drily, searching for me with his hands. "Welcome home, son," he said.

His touch revolted me. It was the touch of something

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out of my childhood. The fear of the ancient past, of the ruined temples, of the masks and carvings.

God, I thought, how I despise this place. The oily smell of it, the gritty taste of mines and smelters and the red-black soot of collieries and the darkness of burrows shored with timbers looted from ruins as old as time. I despise the heavy smoke in air that's too thin to support it, and the crummy shacks of mineworkers and steelworkers, the trapped poverty of it. I hate the marred, scarred face of the whole miserable dead and should be buried planet—

Earth was bad enough. But *this*. It was as though I were seeing Mars for the first time and it was hideous.

"Dennison," the old man said in a whisper. "Oh, I had hopes for Dennison— He must have tried very hard."

I stared at him unbelieving.

"But now you've come back."

My mind recoiled from what I had been thinking. It was too grotesque and too senseless.

I looked around me at the books piled everywhere and covered with reddish dust. At the carvings and figurines salvaged from the sand-drifted temples. It suddenly occurred to me that the room's arrangement was, how can I put it, subtly unearthly. Arranged in a way no terrestrial would arrange it.

"I won't be here for long," I said violently. "Nothing could keep me in this God-forsaken place."

"You were born here," the old man said. "This is your home."

I laughed at that. "Home is where the heart is."

Outside the shanty it lay, this home of mine, under the blanket of a deepening night. The smoke obscured the stars, and from the ground beneath us came the rumblings of drilling and blasting. Across the silted canal the lights of New Providence—those lights that had beckoned to me when I was a child, the city we terrestrials had built on the rubble of temples and unearthly castles. The ginmills were running full blast for the crew of my ship and the thin wind carried the shouts and rowdy laughter, the frontier-bordertown medley of cursing, brawling, catting noises. From the spaceport came the whine of turbines and the roar of jets being tested.

And I saw it all for what it was: the wanton rape of a world.

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Presently, Timur spoke. "Is it ugly, son?"

"It's filthy," I said with feeling.

"It wasn't ugly when I first came here. I still see it the way it was."

This was the pioneer speaking, I thought sadly. The First Lander. I turned away from the door and sat down wearily on the bed. "I need a drink," I said.

Timur's blind eyes seemed to be looking inward. "I'm old, son. Too old now to take you to the temple in the hills. It's been years since I've been there. But if I could, if I could call them to me here—Oh, I could show you Mars as it was. As it should be."

I wondered at his turn of phrase. If I could call them here to me—

It started a strange train of thought in my mind. In a sense *they*, the Martians still did exist. They were memory, and fragments buried under tons of ferric sand, and the marswind mourning.

They existed for Timur as surely as I did. No, more surely than I did. He could see them with that inward-turning sight of the blind.

And I wondered what he had experienced during those two years alone with my mother, alone on this silent, ancient world.

A terrestrial had once said: I think, therefore I am. Couldn't *they* say: We are remembered, therefore we are? The ultimate application of the Berkleyan philosophy. The very endpoint of evolution. A kind of incorporeal immortality.

The idea opened up a frightening vista of a world populated by slumbering memories rudely awakened by the advent of invaders from space. What would these memorial beings desire? Peace. For eternity.

I shivered and rubbed my cold hands together.

The old man nodded. "It's in the blood," he said. "It's happening to you."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said roughly. "I'm going. Write to me if there is anything you want. I'll try and get it to you." I stood up.

"A favor, David, before you go." It was the first time he had called me by name.

"What is it?"

"You used to read to me. Before Mark died, and the others."

"I remember."

"Find the book and do it now."

And childhood memories

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possessed me again and I could not refuse him. It was all there in my mind, waiting to be recalled.

I went to the cluttered shelves and searched the dusty volumes there. I found it. A thin book, very old, by a woman named Stella. The golden letters of the last name had long ago flaked away. The place was even marked by a ribbon that crumbled at my touch. It had seen much use.

Timur followed my movements with that arcane sensitivity of the blind.

"Oh bless your blindness," he quoted before I could begin, *"Oh bless your blindness, glory in your groping—"*

I glanced at him and saw his raddled old face transfigured.

I read the verse aloud and finished with the lines I best remembered.

"Go forth, go forth, nor ask me what comes after; The fifth stone shall not fail you, son of mine—"

I stood for a long moment, holding the book and trying to read the expression on my father's face. He seemed to be listening to voices I could not hear. Tears streaked his cheeks. "They've come," he said softly. "Thank God."

I thought, he's gone mad. He [illegible]ars the ghosts of a race a million years vanished.

And then he began to speak, with a voice that was not his own. A voice so gently timbred, so delicately modulated, that I had the feeling my ears were not fine enough instruments to accept one-tenth of its immense expressiveness.

"Mars was not always as you see it now," the voice said. My father took my arm like one possessed. And I knew that I was listening to the voice of a race gone but not destroyed. "Let me show you Mars—"

And I saw it. I saw the world before the coming of men. I saw the red hills, slumbrous and old under a daylight sky full of stars. I walked under the two moons and watched the shifting shadows on the sand. I saw flying towers too delicate to stand on any planet's breast but this, towers and needle spires soaring like birds in flight. There were ice clouds glare white with sun against a sky the color of cobalt. There was music, intricate and stately rhythms and tones like crystals drifting on the marswind. The canals rippled in sunlight, the deep still water bluegreen at midday. And I

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was there and not dreaming, because I saw my own face in the mirror depths, and behind me fleeting glimpses of lacey figures dancing in woven robes of silver so thin it floated on the air, and the laughing faces hidden behind masks of beaten bronze. I touched the icy water. I stood on the ochre moss and the white rime lay on the ground and it crunched beneath my feet.

I thought wonderingly, this, then was the world Timur found during those two years, the world beyond the curtain of his blindness and the ravaging of time and progress. I could not think how it was done, nor did I care.

I watched the seasons turn and when summer came and the lichens turned to rusty crimson, the tides, deep and full, swelled the canals, and the moss turned green on the ancient ground, nourished by the clean, clear blood of the silent planet—

My inward vision faltered. I had not dreamed that Mars was like that once. It was as though the dreamer had touched the face of the dream and must weep. It was all there, everything I had ever longed for. The stars in a cupped hand.

"You saw," my father said. The voice was his own.

"Yes," I said. "Oh, God, yes."

"They still live, you see. In the hills, in the snowfields. Everywhere."

I sat down abruptly, because my legs were tired and trembling.

"What can we know of the evolution of an alien race?" he asked quietly. "What can we know about them at all?"

"That was what you showed my brothers," I said.

"Yes."

"That was what I ran away from."

"I'm sorry, David."

I sat silently, containing the ache of longing in my chest.

"Now look at your Mars," Timur said harshly.

And I saw the smoke again, and the ginmills, the filthy refuse. I felt myself crumbling inside. "I don't know. I don't know at all. It's our way—"

I broke off suddenly because I realized that it wasn't *our* way. It was *their* way. And once I knew that, I knew what it was I must do. What Dennison, and Mark, and the others had tried to do.

I slipped the book I still held in my hand into my

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pocket. I was the fifth stone.

"We will not meet again," Timur said sadly.

"No," I said.

"You've listened to them," my father said. "They will be with you always."

I walked out into the night. Across the water and the city I could see the wide winged shape of my ship being hoisted into take-off position.

Calder sat quite still in the darkness of his room. The recorder shut itself off.

Bits of the here-and-now impinged on his consciousness. The old man had flung five stones. No, not just the old man. *They* had done it. To get their world back.

Even that wasn't quite right. *They* and Timur and his five dead sons were one.

He felt himself stiffen with fright. He heard Timur telling David: They will be with you always."

Then they were here.

Here, he thought. With me. Now.

No, not *with* me. I am Timur Denby. I am David and all his brothers.

I am one of them.

Total transference. They had bridged the gulf.

But everything has a function, Calder thought. David completed his. What is mine?

In the sky he saw the rain of meteors that had been falling for two days, ever since Captain David Denby had rammed his ship into the space-station.

Not only had the men on the Wheel died, but New Providence would have to be abandoned, because although ships could fly from Mars to Earth, they could not fly from Earth to Mars without the Wheel.

What was Calder's function?

Guardian.

But of what, and how?

His eyes left the sky and caught the brilliantly lighted machine shops and construction sheds where already the long, long task of building another Wheel was underway.

He understood.

He would teach others.

The Mars colony was finished. Another Wheel would never be launched.

Calder looked back at the sky with longing. The red eye of Mars gleamed low on the horizon. He thought of the silent lichen-covered rocks and the deep cool waters of the canals with sadness.

For nothing is accomplished without sacrifice.

He would never go home.

THE END

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Illustrated by SCHELLING

THE FASTEST DRAW

By LARRY EISENBERG

Steinberg was an electronic genius. Here, the Old West was dead and gone for many decades, but now once again a man could stroll down Main Street for a showdown with the Marshal.

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LIKE most men, Amos Handworthy was a creature of many parts. To his business associates he was a sober, calculating entrepreneur, given occasionally to rash ventures which through outrageous turns of luck usually ended well. To his employees he was a distant, ominous figure, wandering through his electronics plant occasionally, staring with pale blue eyes at a myriad of trivial details, sifting through the reject box of discarded transistors and occasionally stopping to ask a loaded but seemingly innocuous question of one of the production engineers. To his housekeeper he was a brusque, harsh man, not given overly to entertaining or keeping late hours but sober, sedate and completely absorbed in his pervasive habit of collecting automata.

Very few men had ever seen the eyes of Amos Handworthy come aglow and Manny Steinberg was one of them. Manny was a superb engineer who combined the ability to carry out a sophisticated circuit design with the old fashioned desire to tinker. It was almost physically painful for him to pass by a mechanical device that was not in working order. And so, in his first visit to the Pecos Saloon, a town landmark that had been restored to its pristine décor through the generosity of Amos Handworthy, Manny caught sight of the magnificent music making machine as soon as he cut through the swinging doors. He proceeded first to the bar and availed himself of the tequila and lemon juice which was the specialty of the house. Much of the town showed the influence of its close location to the Mexican border, the large Spanish speaking population, the frijoles that were vended off street carts, and the tastes in liquor.

Still sucking on the lemon, Manny walked over and surveyed the glass enclosed music maker, four vertical violins arrayed in a circle with a hoop of horse hair spanning about the four violin bridges, electromagnet stops hovering above the strings. A dried out square of paper had been crudely taped across the glass with the clear inked inscription, "Out of Order." He had removed the back door of the machine and was examining the innards when he felt a proprietary hand on his shoulder and swivelled about to meet the questioning gaze of his boss, Amos Handworthy.

"I think I can make it go," said Manny, not certain that he could but unable to leave this marvelous array of gears, levers, and multi-pinned rotating disks.

"I've tried to have it repaired and failed," said Amos Hand-

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worthy. "But if you can do it, its worth a thousand dollars to me."

MANNY nodded as though this offer had tipped the balance but in truth it made very little difference to him. Even the following week, when he demonstrated to a full saloon how beautifully the four violins played the Mephisto Waltz, he accepted the check which Amos Handworthy placed in his hand with some puzzlement, not quite connecting it with the maintenance miracle he had just wrought. Handworthy insisted on having the machine play again and again, but after the fourth successful round, Many had lost interest in the device and was more concerned in downing tequilas than in listening to the music.

Later that night, as he lay abed on a rumpled sweat-wet sheet, wondering how in hell he had taken a job in this God-forsaken town in Texas, he remembered dimly that his boss, Mr. Handworthy, had invited him over to the stately Handworthy Mansion. He was not sure when the invitation was for, or whether the occasion was of a business or social character, but he knew that it was mandatory that he come.

Fortunately, a handwritten note on gray, unembossed letter paper arrived the following day, confirming the invitation and specifying a dinner date the following Friday evening at eight P.M. Manny's income was a good one and he had eaten in some of the finest restaurants in the country but he had never been to the home of a truly wealthy man before. It was with no little trepidation that he appeared at the door of the Handworthy Mansion and was ushered into the house by the liveried butler who was, to Manny's intense surprise, white.

He was somewhat taken aback to find that he was the only dinner guest and that the burden of making conversation would be totally his job. But he found that contrary to his expectation, Amos Handworthy did almost all of the talking.

The food was plentiful but not lavish or exotic in character. Mr. Handworthy himself carved out liberal slices off the huge side of beef that was brought in on a great silver salver. And although Mr. Handworthy did not drink it, the wine was carefully chilled and of good (but not the best) quality.

Since Manny had been raised in a low income Jewish inhabited section of New York City and had, despite his extensive rootless shifting about the country, no real insight into how anybody else lived, he found himself quite taken with the rambling tales

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that Amos Handworthy told of his town's history.

"My father," said Amos Handworthy toward the close of the dinner, "was one of the last frontier marshals and maybe *the greatest.* His draw was reputed to be so fast that the eye could barely follow it and he never missed his target."

"But he drank like a fish," he thought, "and spent most of his time at the sporting house on East Maple."

"As a boy," he said aloud, "I could think of nothing more ideal than to follow in his footsteps when I grew up. Course, when I *had* grown up, there was no more frontier, no more show downs in the center of town. It was a terrible disappointment and one that I haven't gotten over, even yet."

"My father," said Manny pensively, "claimed that I had clumsy wooden hands. He was wrong and I think he knew it. But he'd never admit it to me."

"Do you know what disturbs me?" said Amos Handworthy. "There have been challenges for me, some financial, some physical, others social, and I've met and beaten every one of them. But I've never been in the same mother naked kind of situation my Father had to meet where it was one man's raw courage and skill against another's."

"The thing that disturbs me," said Manny, "is that whenever I knock off a particularly tough job, instead of being elated, I'm totally depressed until the next challenging one comes along."

Amos Handworthy raised the wine bottle to the light and studied the play of color through the thickened glass.

"Come inside," he said abruptly. "I've got something special I want to show you."

Manny followed after his host and found himself in a huge, high ceilinged room flanked on all four walls by reward posters, some as much as one hundred years old. There were no furnishings in the room, just a series of unusual pieces of furniture that proved on closer scrutiny to be automata of diverse types. In the center of the room was a great amorphous mass covered by an enormous sheet.

"I have no kin," said Handworthy, staring possessively about him. "I've never married so I have no children. But I'm a happy man nevertheless. These are my children," he said, gesticulating about him. "This one, is a particular delight," he added, his voice swelling with pride as he brought Manny over for a closer view.

IT was a gray enamelled case surmounted by a glistening blue hemisphere adorned with

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tiny stars of silver and gold. Within the hemisphere was an exquisite miniature ball room, the walls lined with mirrors, and when Handworthy wound up the movement and released the catch, two groups of tiny dancers began to waltz toward each other. Their images were caught up and multiplied an hundredfold in the mirrors creating a truly breathtaking sight as the unseen strings of a harp were plucked below in the gray enamelled case.

Before Manny could comment, he was whisked over to a superbly crafted wooden figure of a charming child, a painted smile wreathing the gently carved mouth. The child was seated on a mahogany stool and when the latching hook had been lowered, it leaned forward and after dipping a feathered pen into an inkwell, began to write in smooth cursive flow. When she leaned back, her motions apparently brought to a close, Manny bent forward and found to his intense amazement a beautifully crafted letter of some fifty words written to the mother of the child.

There were other amazing sights, an android that fingered and breathed wind into a flute that played sweetly, a reclining Cleopatra that rose, bowed gravely at the waist and then lay down once more upon her feathered couch. Since each of the treasured machines was in perfect functioning order, Manny rapidly lost interest and merely followed Handworthy about, nodding politely, his mind distant upon a persistent circuit problem that was still unsolved. But he was jarred back to reality when, with the reverence that one would use to lay bare a sleeping nymph, Handworthy removed the sheet from the huge centerpiece of the room. It was a small segment of a Western street, complete with hitching post, before which stood an uncannily lifelike figure of a town marshal, complete with vest and badge, chaps and holstered gun. The painted face was scowling and from closer scrutiny it was apparent that the figure was capable of complex motion.

"The others," said Amos Handworthy, "are marvelous antiques that I've collected, but this fellow was made to my own specifications in Switzerland. His clothing is quite authentic and he really works. Watch this!"

He stepped forward and took a loosely draped gun belt off the hitching post to the right of the Marshal and buckled it about his waist.

"The device is electrically operated," he continued. "The instant I draw, the Marshal draws too, and the trick is to hit him somewhere on his target photo-

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cells with a beam of light that flashes out of my gun, before he can get off his shot. I can adjust the speed of his draw within fairly wide limits and I've been moving him up to faster and faster speeds. But I've gotten pretty damn fast."

WITH a drawing motion that was almost a blur, he whipped out his gun and pulled the trigger. The Marshal was fast, but apparently not *as* fast for suddenly a recorded voice bellowed in pain and gasped, "you got me, you dirty varmint."

"A little touch of my own," said Amos Handworthy. "That's what happens when I hit him."

He looked down at his gun, almost proudly; and Manny had the eerie feeling that it was only with restraint that he did not blow the imaginary smoke away from the gun barrel.

"That's a highly imaginative device," said Manny.

"He is," said Amos Handworthy. "But he's still not quite what I want him to be. I have an idea that you can make him the kind of opponent I need."

"What do you want?" said Manny. All of his ennui was beginning to evaporate and the familiar exultant response to challenge had begun to grow in him.

"I want him to be able to hit me, too, figuratively speaking," said Amos Handworthy. "As things stand now, this shoot out is entirely one sided. I'd like to know, for instance, if he's been able to hit me."

"I can do it," said Manny. "You'll have to get me off my regular project, but I can do it."

"I'll call your division chief in the morning," said Amos Handworthy. "You'll stay here with me and you can have all the time you need."

Manny did not sleep well in his spacious overly comfortable bed. He was up early the following morning pouring over the construction plans for the Marshal and examining the instruction folder which the Swiss company, with typical thoroughness, had included in the neatly packed maintenance kit. He caught the guiding concept of the design at once, and made his plans to modify the Marshal along lines that incorporated control techniques that were basically electronic.

He phoned the plant and requisitioned transistors, metal film resistors, capacitors, and various other components necessary for his task. Handworthy did not approach him as he worked and his meals were served to him either in his own room or the great room where all the automata were located. He made all the changes himself, snipping leads, soldering, forming tight

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mechanical joints with deft fingers that almost seemed alive and apart from his body.

TEN days later, he called in Amos Handworthy and demonstrated what he had done.

"I've modified both guns so that you and the Marshal will now shoot at each other with ultra violet light. You'll both wear vests that are sensitive to this light. I monitor the hits electrically by measuring the resistance of those areas where a bullet would severely injure a man. Nothing will occur unless you or the Marshal are hit in such an area. Furthermore, you can both continue to shoot for an *indefinite* length of time. However, I've altered the Marshal's aiming mechanism so that if he's hit in a vital spot, he won't shoot as accurately. Similarly, if you are hit, a defocussing mechanism operates on your light bulb so that your gun is no longer as accurate. And instead of the recorded voice, if either of you is hit in the heart, your gun goes dead."

Amos Handworthy's eyes began to glow with a fire such as Manny Steinberg had never seen and it excited him that his work had brought on so wonderful a response. He slipped the new vest on Handworthy, handed him the wired holster and gun, and stepped back. After fastening his belt and readying himself, Handworthy drew as before and fired swiftly at the Marshal, who was firing back almost as rapidly. Suddenly Handworthy stopped and looked at his gun in dismay.

"My trigger's locked," he cried.

"He's killed you," said Manny drily. "You beat him to the draw, but he's hit you in the heart."

"I see," said Handworthy slowly. "Then it looks like I've got a hell of a lot more practicing to do."

* * *

IT was a full month before Manny Steinberg was invited back to the Mansion, and with great pride his host demonstrated how he killed the Marshal, *every time.*

"I've got him set for his fastest draw, too," said Handworthy. "At this point, he's just no match for me."

"I guess that wraps it up," said Manny, knowing full well that it couldn't end this way. "You're just too damned good."

Amos Handworthy shook his head slowly.

"You don't believe that and neither do I. Its an unfair battle, unfair because we've excluded the most vital element of all."

"What element is that?" said Manny although the answer popped into his head even as he spoke and he began to envision

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the approach that had to be taken.

"There's no *fear* in this situation," said Handworthy. "When two men were in an actual shoot-out they were both afraid of being killed. But the Marshal is oblivious to fear and so for the most part am I. Suppose for instance in some way you could make him shoot better if I were nervous and shoot less accurately if I were deadly calm."

"There is a way to do that," said Manny. "I can electrically monitor your vasomotor reflexes by means of your pulse and sweat reactions. Then I would program the Marshal's reflexes in just the way you suggest. But the thing I can't understand is how such a step would have any real meaning. Why in God's name would you ever be frightened? There's nothing in this situation to make it happen."

"I have a very vivid imagination," said Handworthy. "As a child I had no playmates and still I populated an entire world in my mind, every one a distinct person. Don't you see, I can project myself into feeling that I'm in the *real* life and death situation just as long as the Marshal become's a creature sensitive to fear."

IT took Manny almost three weeks this time to make the requisite changes and he carried out in addition an extensive series of pulse and skin resistance measurements on Handworthy. When he was satisfied that the Marshal had reached the ultimate state, he called in Handworthy and demonstrated what he had done.

"I've installed," said Manny, "a feedback circuit that's inoperative when your typical emotional reaction exists. But the circuit comes into play when you become more nervous than usual and the Marshal will therefore shoot faster and more accurately. On the other hand, if you should become less concerned, calmer perhaps, the Marshal's aim would tend to go askew and his firing rate would slow down. In other words, you and the Marshal are indissolubly linked through your nervous system whenever you strap on your shooting vest."

"Fine," said Amos Handworthy and the brilliance of his usually lackluster eyes gave an added emphasis to the word. "You've surpassed my greatest expectations with these new changes. And while I know it wasn't part of our bargain, I intend to add a pretty big sum to your monthly check."

"Thanks," said Manny automatically. Already he was becoming aware of the depression that followed his engineering triumphs. As he left the house,

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he had almost completely lost interest in his accomplishment.

Meanwhile, Amos Handworthy was examining the guns with great care, particularly the tiny switch that activated the firing cycle. It was evident to him that as soon as his gun lifted off the switch, electrical activity commenced. After first unplugging the Marshal's electrical cable, he carefully removed the Ultra violet loaded guns from the fixture in his holster and the Marshal's holster, and replaced them with beautifully machined Colt .45's that were loaded with real bullets.

"There's absolutely no doubt that the mechanical action will be the same," thought Handworthy," and now the element of real fear, both *mine* and *his* will be in the picture. We're going to have a real shootout, the kind you don't see any more."

He replaced the plug in the wall socket and turned about to face the Marshal quite squarely, shifting his belt around so that his gun would clear free of the holster. The Marshal stared at him out of sightless painted blue eyes, his mechanical hand resting stolidly on his gun.

"Even now, it isn't an even match," thought Handworthy ruefully. "I couldn't be any calmer than I am now. I guess it never can come out just exactly as I want it to."

As his fingers flashed lightning fast to his gun, it suddenly occurred to him that Manny was right, that he and the Marshal were indissolubly linked through his own nervous system. He had no kin, no wife, no children. The Marshal was the only one on earth really tied to him. And in that instant, a terrible surge of fear came over him at the thought of killing his own.

THE END

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By all the laws of nature, he should have been dead. But if he were alive . . . then there was something he had to find.

CULLY

By JACK EGAN **Illustrated by SCHELLING**

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ABOVE him eighty feet of torpid, black water hung like a shroud of Death, and still he heard his ragged breathing. And something else. Cully concentrated on that sound, and the rhythmic pulsing of his heart. Somehow he had to retain a hold on his sanity . . . or his soul.

After an hour of careful breathing and exploring of body sensations, Cully realized he could move. He flexed an arm; a mote of gold sand sifted upward in the dark water. It had a pleasant color, in contrast with the ominous shades of the sea. In a few moments, he had struggled to a sitting position, delighting in the curtain of glittering metal grains whirling around him as he moved.

And the other sound. A humming in his mind; a distant burble of tiny voices of other minds. Words swirling in giddy patterns he couldn't understand.

Shortly thereafter, Cully discovered why he still lived, breathed: a suit. A yellow, plastic, water-tight suit, with an orange-on-black shield on the left breast pocket, and a clear bubble-helmet. He felt weight on his back and examined it: two air tanks and their regulator, a radio, and . . . the box.

Suit, tanks, regulator; radio, black water, box; sand, sea, stillness.

Cully considered his world. It was small; it was conceivable; it was incomplete.

Where is it?

"Where is what?" He knew he had a voice—a means of communication between others of his kind, using low-frequency heat waves caused by agitation of air molecules. Why couldn't he make it work?

Words. Thousands of them, at his beck and call. What were they? What did they mean? He shifted uncomfortably in the tight yellow suit, searching the near horizon for . . .

Where is it?

A VAGUE calling came from beyond the black sea curtain. Objectively, because he could do nothing to stop them, he watched his feet pick up, move forward, put down; pick up, move forward, put down. Funny. He had the feeling, the concept, that this action held meaning. It was supposed to cause some reaction, accomplish an act. He wondered at the regular movement of his legs. One of them hurt. A hurt is a sensation of pain, caused by over-loading sensory-units in the body; a hurt is bad, because it indicates something is wrong.

Something certainly was wrong. Something stirred in Cully's mind. He stopped and sat down on the sandy sea bottom, gracefully, like a ballet dancer.

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He examined his foot. There was a tiny hole in the yellow plastic fabric, and a thin string of red-black was oozing out. Blood. He knew.

He was bleeding. He could do nothing about it. He got up and resumed walking.

Where is it?

Cully lifted his head in annoyance at the sharp thought.

"Go away," he said in a low, pleading voice. The sound made him feel better. He began muttering to himself.

"Water, black, s-sand, hurt. Pain. Radio tanks . . ."

It didn't sound right. After a few minutes, he was quiet. The manythoughts were calling him. He must go to the manythoughts.

If his foot was bleeding, then something had happened; if something had happened, then his foot was bleeding.

"No!"

If something had happened, then maybe other things had happened—before that. But how could something happen in a world of flat gold sand and flaccid sea? Surely there was something wrong. Wrong: the state of being not-right; something had happened that was not-right. Cully stared at the edges of the unmoving curtain before him.

Where is it?

It was a driving, promise-filled concept. No words; just the sense that something wonderful lay just beyond reach. But this voice was different from the manythoughts. It was directing his body; his mind was along for the ride.

The sameness of the sea and sand became unbearable. It was too-right, somehow. Cully felt anger, and kicked up eddies of dust. It changed the sameness a little. He kicked more up, until it swirled around him in a thick gold haze, blotting out the terrible emptiness of the sea.

He felt another weight at his side. He found a holster and gun. He recognized neither. Again he watched objectively as his hand pulled the black object out and handled it. His body was evidently familiar with it, though it was strange to his eyes. His finger slipped automatically into the trigger sheaf. His legs were still working under two drives: the manythoughts' urging, and something else, buried in him. A longing. Up-and-down, back-and-for

Where is it?

Anger, frustration flared in him. His hand shot out, gun at ready. He turned around slowly. Through the settling trail of suspended sand, nothing was visible.

AGAIN he was moving. Something made his legs move. He walked on through the shrouds of Death until he felt a

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taut singing in his nerves. An irrational fear sprang out in him, cascading down his spine, and Cully shuddered. Ahead there was some*thing*. Two motives: get there because it (they?) calls; get there because you must.

Where is it?

The mind-voice was excited, demanding. Something was out there, besides the sameness. Cully walked on, trailing gold. The deathcurtain parted . . .

An undulating garden of blue-and-gold streamers suddenly drifted toward him on an unfelt current. Cully was held, entranced. They flowed before him, their colors dazzling, hypnotic.

Come closer, Earthling, the manythoughts spoke inside his head, soothingly.

Here it is! Cully's mind shouted.

Cully's mind was held, hypnotized, but his body moved of its own volition.

He moved again. His mind and the manythoughts' spoke: fulfillment—almost. There was one action left that must be completed.

Cully's arms moved. They detached the small black box from his pack. He moved on into the midst of the weaving, gold-laced plants. Little spicules licked out from their flexing stalks and jabbed, unsensed, into Cully's body to draw nourishment. From the manythoughts came the sense of complete fulfillment.

From Cully's mind came further orders.

Lie down. It was a collective concept. *Lie still. We are friends.*

He could not understand. They were speaking words; words were beyond him. His head shook in despair. The voices were implanting an emotion of horror at what his hands were doing, but he had no control over his body. It was as if it were not his.

The black box was now lying in the sand among the streaming plants. Cully's fingers reached out and caressed a small panel. A soundless 'click' ran through the murkiness. The strangely beautiful, gold-laced blue plants began a writhing dance. Their spicules withdrew and jabbed, withdrew and jabbed. A rending, silent scream tore the quiet waters.

NO! they cried. It was a negative command, mixed in with the terrible screaming. *Turn it off!*

"Stop it, stop it!" Cully tried to say, but there were no words. He tried to cover his ears within the helmet, but the cries went on. Emotions roiled the water: pain, hurt, reproach. Cully sobbed. Something was wrong here; something was killing the plants—the beautiful blue things! The plants were withering, dying. He looked up at them,

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stupified, not understanding, tears streaming down his face. What did they want from him? What had he done . . .

Where is it?

A different direction materialized; a new concept of desire.

CULLY'S body turned and crawled away from the wonderful, dying garden, oblivious to the pleadings floating, now weakly, in the torpid water. He scuffed up little motes of golden sand, leaving a low-lying scud along the bottom, back to the little black box in the garden. The plants, the box, all were forgotten by now. Cully crawled on, not knowing why. A rise appeared; surprise caught Cully unaware. A change in the sameness!

Where is it?

Again the voice was insistent. His desire was close ahead; he did not look back at the black churning on the sea bottom. His legs worked, his chest heaved, words swirled in his mind. He topped the rise

Below him, in the center of a shallow golden bowl, floated a long, shiny cylinder. Even from here he knew it was huge. He knew other things about it: how heavy it was; how it was; that it carried others of his kind. He had been in it before. And they were waiting for him. He lurched on.

"Captain! Here comes Cully!" the midshipman shouted from the airlock. "Look what they've done to him!"

The old man's grey eyes took in the spectacle without visible emotion. He watched the pathetic, bleeding yellow plastic sack crawl up to the ship and look up. His hands reached down and lifted Cully up into the lock.

They took his suit off and stared with loathing at what had once been a man. A white scar zig-zagged across his forehead. The Captain bent close, in range of the dim blue eyes.

"It was a brave thing you did, Cully. The whole system will be grateful. Venus could never be colonized as long as those cannibals were there to eat men, and drive men mad." Cully fingered the scar on his forehead, and looked unseeing into the old man's compassionate eyes. "I'm sorry Cully. We all are. But there was no other way. Prefrontal lobotomy, destruction of your speech center . . . it was the only way you could get past the telepaths and destroy them. I'm sorry, Cully. The race of Man shall long honor your name."

Cully smiled at the old man, the words churning in his brain; but he did not understand.

Where is it?

The emptiness was still there.

THE END

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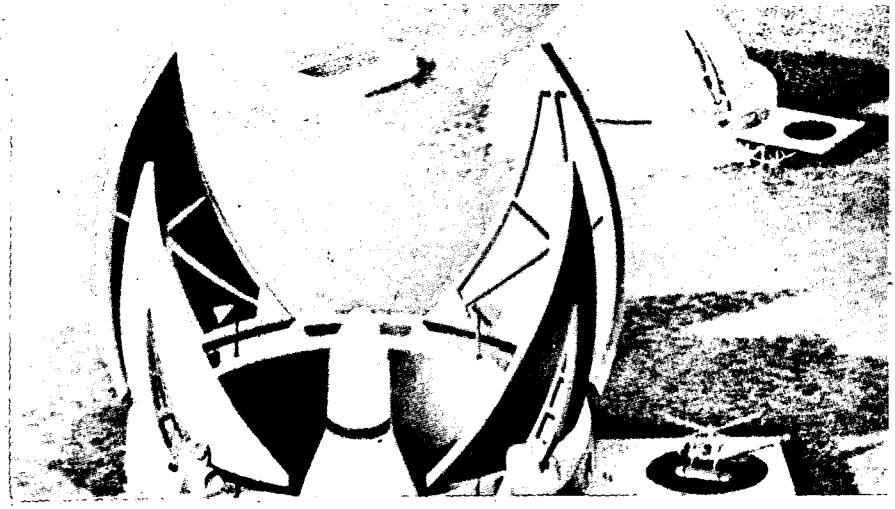

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